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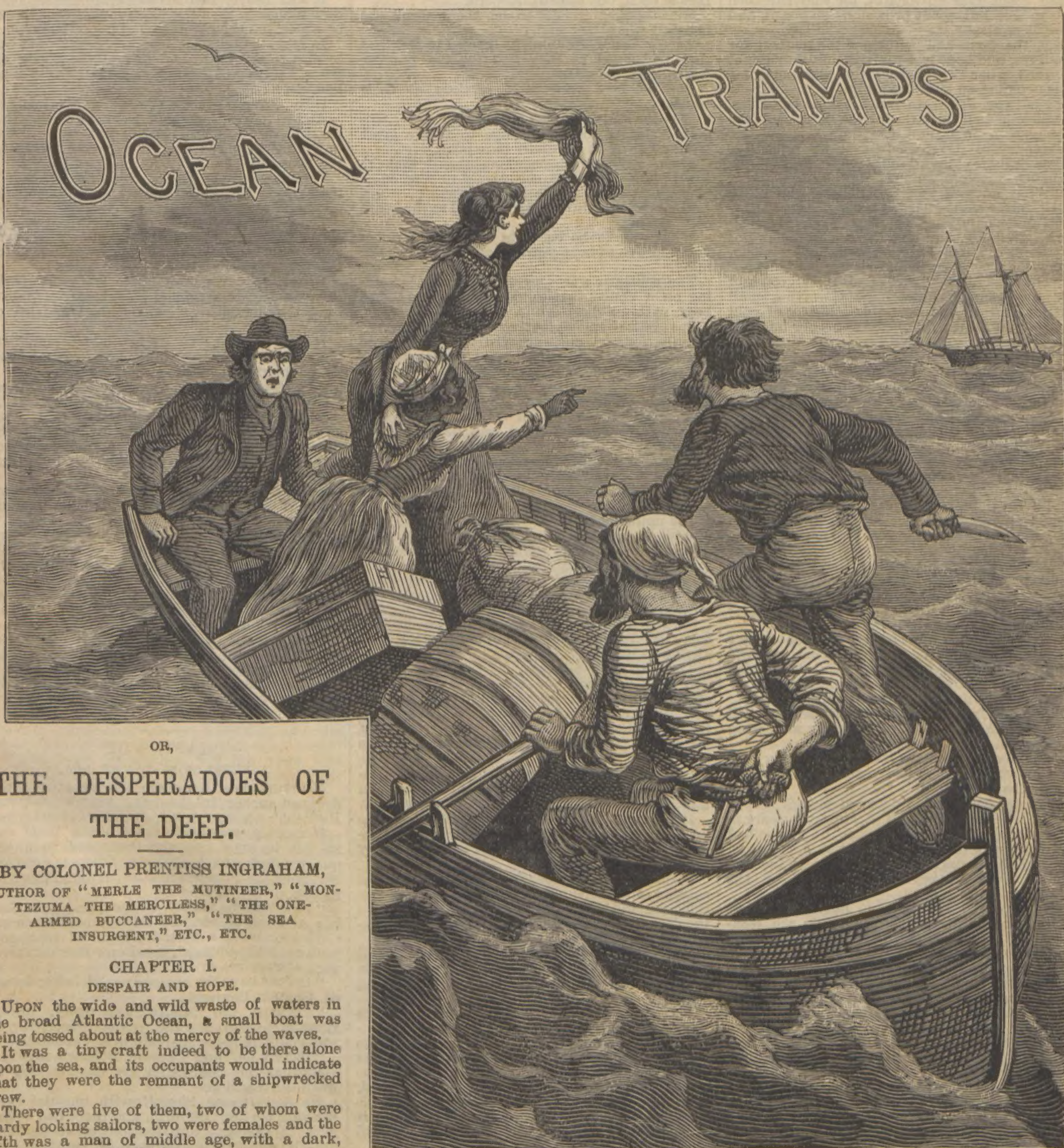
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OR,

THE DESPERADOES OF THE DEEP.

BY COLONEL PRENTISS INGRAHAM,
AUTHOR OF "MERLE THE MUTINEER," "MON-
TEZUMA THE MERCILESS," "THE ONE-
ARMED BUCCANEER," "THE SEA
INSURGENT," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

DESPAIR AND HOPE.

UPON the wide and wild waste of waters in the broad Atlantic Ocean, a small boat was being tossed about at the mercy of the waves.

It was a tiny craft indeed to be there alone upon the sea, and its occupants would indicate that they were the remnant of a shipwrecked crew.

There were five of them, two of whom were hardy looking sailors, two were females and the fifth was a man of middle age, with a dark, stern yet not unkindly face.

One of the females was a negress, a pretty quadroon of eighteen, and yet her face was now

"SILENCE, GIRL, OR I WILL KILL YOU!" CRIED ONE OF THE MEN, SPRINGING TOWARD HER, KNIFE IN HAND.

full of fright and despair, as she cast her large dark eyes around the wide expanse of waters.

The other was her mistress, a maiden yet under twenty, with a face of rare beauty, combining as it did the complexion and dark eyes of the brunette with the golden hair of the blonde.

Her form was the acme of symmetry and her expression the reflex of a noble nature.

She was richly attired, and wore a mass of jewelry, as though put on to preserve the jewels rather than for display and the young negress also was similarly bedecked with costly gems.

The elderly man had the appearance of being an American, one who had long dwelt in sunny lands, and his air was that of a well-to-do gentleman.

There was a mass of luggage amidships in the boat, and forward was a small water-cask and box of provisions, with but one oar, for a second was broken.

The two seamen were without doubt Spaniards, dark-faced and evil-looking, for their avarice and desire for self-preservation were both excited at the time they are presented to the reader.

Two days before a gallant brig, bound from New York to Havana, had been caught in a cyclone and wrecked.

Ere the boats could all be launched and filled, the one upon which the eyes of the reader have just been turned was torn loose from the wreck, and sent driving away alone in the storm, with but five people on board.

The American gentleman, who was a Cuban planter, having married in Cuba, with his daughter, her maid, and the two sailors, had given themselves up for lost, for they had been able to get but scant provisions on board, and no sails or a spar.

But the boat had withstood the tempest for two days, and hope had revived that they might be saved, when they beheld the prospects of a storm coming on with the night.

"I tell you, Juan, we must look to ourselves, and as soon as it is dark, for the boat will live with us alone in it, and the provisions will last two for several days, where they won't last five people but two days," soliloquized one of the seamen to his companion.

"What do you say do, Pedro?" the other asked, in the same guarded tone.

"The senorita went to New York to fix up for her wedding, and you can see that she's got thousands of pesos on in jewels and trinkets, which she took from the boxes."

"Then there are bales of silks, velvets, and laces in those waterproof bundles worth a small fortune, and the old senor has a big lot of gold with him, not to speak of the gems her mistress put on the negress to save."

"Yes."

"I tell you it's a prize worth ten thousand pesos each to us, and I say drop 'em overboard when dark comes, and then we can get to some of the islands with the boat."

"But a storm is coming on with the night."

"We'll ride it out so much the better without them."

"As you say, comrade; but how is it to be done?"

"I'll drop the oar on the senor's head soon after dark, and you heave the senorita over the side, and then we can toss the negress after her."

"All right," was the answer, and the two men glanced back at their victims.

They started as they beheld the eyes of the senorita fixed upon them.

"Do you think she heard?"

"Guess not; but what if she did, the thing's got to be done, and the old senor is not armed."

From gazing upon the two men, the maiden turned her eyes over the sea, and at the skies.

There certainly were prospects of a storm.

The skies looked ugly and the sea was still rough, while the wind was gradually increasing in strength.

Certainly the situation was an appalling one, for Victorine Rudolph had heard what the two plotters had said.

Her keen hearing had detected enough to put her on the *qui vive*, and straining her ears to listen, though not appearing to do so, she had caught enough to understand that her father, herself and the negress were doomed by the two seamen, even if they escaped death by the storm.

She appeared not to have heard them, but listlessly gazed around the sea, while she wondered what she could do to avert the double danger confronting them.

She knew that in the haste of getting into the boat and leaving the sinking wreck, her father had brought no weapon with him, while she was sure that the two seamen were armed, so that they were at their mercy wholly.

In glancing about the sea the eyes of Victorine Rudolph fell upon an object which caused her to start.

Then she gazed again, and from her lips, in almost delirious accents of joy, broke the words:

"A vessel! a vessel!"

The two Spanish seamen sprung to their feet muttering oaths of disappointment.

They preferred, for so rich a prize, to risk the

storm which would fall upon them before very long.

But there, lying out upon the sea, with no sail set, was a vessel.

It was a schooner, and she carried no flag, but was merely an armed craft.

The boat was drifting in such a way that she might go by unseen; but Victorine had already sprung to her feet and was waving her bright red scarf, while she sent her voice across the waters in a loud, prolonged call.

"Silence, girl, or I will kill you!" cried one of the men, springing toward her, knife in hand.

"Yes, make her shut up, Pedro, and I'll keep the old man quiet," responded the other, and he leveled a pistol at the senor's head.

But a cry came from the negress, and it showed the two seamen that their game was at an end.

"We are seen! they see us!"

So shouted the negress, and a glance was sufficient to show that she spoke the truth, for the schooner was getting up sail, as though to stand after the boat.

CHAPTER II.

THE MEXICAN CAPTAIN.

THE two seamen at once realized that their game was blocked, and fearing the consequences to themselves, at their act of sudden hostility, they muttered words together for an instant and then one said:

"You have done it now, for that craft is a pirate."

"Yes," chimed in the other, "and that is why we tried to force you to keep quiet."

Victorine Rudolph looked calmly into the face of each, but uttered no word.

She thought it best to let them think she believed what they said.

As for Senor Rudolph he seemed to feel that they had acted as they had for the purpose which they had stated.

But his face grew most anxious at their words.

Was the strange vessel indeed a pirate?

It certainly looked strange to find a craft lying off there at sea under bare poles.

Then, too, the schooner was armed, that he could plainly see; and she carried no flag, so he feared it was as the two seamen said.

Their words also brought a chill to the heart of Victorine.

What was to be her fate should the strange vessel prove to be a pirate, flashed through her mind.

The schooner was now under sail and standing on a course that would bring her up to the boat, within a short while.

She was a rakish-looking craft, and armed heavily, for her guns were visible, and a large crowd of men could be seen upon her decks.

She came along only under mainsail and jib, and showed no colors, but officers in uniform could be seen upon her quarter-deck.

One of these was a man of striking appearance, tall, broad-shouldered and distinguished-looking.

He was past thirty years of age, and his face was one to dread in spite of its fine features and a smile that constantly beamed about the mouth.

The uniform he wore was a handsome one, and his appearance, taken altogether, was that of a born sailor and a resolute, daring man.

Several other officers were under him, but they had the look of being, with the exception of the senior officer, of Spanish birth, while he with his captain were certainly Americans.

"That boat should not have escaped your eyes, sir," he said sternly, calling up to the man aloft who was on the lookout.

The man made no reply.

He had not seen the boat until one of the officers on the deck had pointed it out to him, and immediately after the clear hail of Victorine Rudolph was heard and the waving of her scarlet scarf caught the eyes of those on the schooner.

"A boat in sight, senor," called Senor Conrad the officer, down to his captain who was in the cabin, and the man described came on deck.

In a short while the schooner was near the boat, and none too soon, for darkness was coming on and the storm threatened to break at any moment.

Seeing that there were females in the boat the captain of the schooner at once sprung to the side and aided not only Victorine Rudolph to the deck but also her maid Liza, while he extended a helping hand to the Senor Rudolph.

His cabin was at once placed at the disposal of those whom he had picked up from the sea and his vessel made ready to meet the coming tempest.

It soon came and with savage fury; but the schooner was a very stanch craft, her commander proved to be a skilled seaman, and the crew stood at their posts so that the storm was ridden out in perfect safety.

The next morning arose bright and beautiful, and Captain Belmont was standing upon his quarter-deck, while the schooner, under easy working sails, was bowling along over the still rough sea.

Out of the cabin came Senor Rudolph and he

stepped quickly to the side of the captain and said:

"Senor Captain, I am glad to thank you for all you have done for us, as last night the breaking of the storm prevented."

"My name is Rudolph, senor, and I am an American by birth, but a resident in Cuba where I married, and my daughter and myself were returning to our plantation home on the coast, when wrecked by the hurricane of three days ago."

The young captain grasped the hand of his guest and after telling him how glad he was to have served him, he added:

"And I too am an American, Senor Rudolph, but at present commanding a cruiser in the service of Mexico."

"You have but to tell me where your home is, and I will gladly land you there, senor."

Just then Victorine came on deck and she too greeted the schooner's commander with a pleasant manner and thanked him over and over again for his kindness to them; but she blushed under his admiring gaze, and somehow she seemed to feel a little dread of the Mexican officer.

The conversation then turned upon their having been found afloat upon the sea, and Victorine said, earnestly:

"And when I tell you, Senor Captain, that I overheard those two men plotting to put us to death, you can understand how much we owe to you."

Captain Belmont asked several questions regarding the two plotting seamen, and said quietly:

"You need feel no dread of them, senorita."

It was nearly two weeks before the schooner cast anchor in the little harborage, to the shores of which ran the plantation of Senor Rudolph.

In fact, the schooner had never seemed to sail so slow to her crew, and one of the young officers, Lieutenant Conrad, remarked to a brother lieutenant:

"The captain is certainly taking his time."

And so it was, for Frank Belmont had lost his heart to the beautiful Cuban girl, and he was unwilling to part with her any sooner than he was compelled to.

The home of the Senor Rudolph was one of the finest in Cuba, and the white walls loomed up grandly from the sea.

The mansion was very large, with a plaza, or court, and was surrounded by flower gardens and beautiful foliage, while gravel walks led through velvet-like lawns to the shores.

Urged to accompany them ashore Captain Belmont had done so, and that evening, finding himself alone with Victorine he had told her of his love.

He was earnest, perhaps brusque in manner; but she saw that he certainly loved her, and ere she could give reply he said:

"I will come for you some day in the future, Senorita Victorine, to claim you for my bride."

Before response could be made as to whether she would accept such honor, or refuse it, the Senor Rudolph entered the room, and soon after Captain Belmont returned to his vessel and set sail.

The Senor Rudolph had urged him to come again to visit them, but Victorine had remained silent.

"He vowed he would punish those two traitor seamen, my child—look! he has kept his word," cried the Cuban planter, and he pointed to the schooner, where suddenly up into mid-air were hoisted the struggling forms of Pedro and Juan, who had plotted to kill Senor Rudolph and his beautiful daughter.

With a cry of horror Victorine turned away from the awful sight, while the words came from her lips:

"Yes, he is a man to keep his word, and he promised to come back here to make me his bride. I should have told him all."

CHAPTER III.

A FREELANCE OF THE SEA.

MONTHS passed away ere the schooner again dropped anchor in the little harbor of Senor Rudolph's plantation home on the Cuban coast.

It was a pleasant afternoon, as the little vessel felt its way into the basin, and upon the quarter-deck stood Captain Belmont, eagerly watching the mansion and its surroundings with a glass.

"I see but one person, Conrad, and the place has a deserted air," he said to his lieutenant, Carlos Conrad, a splendid type of manhood, with a darkly-bronzed, handsome face that was very attractive.

"It does have the appearance of being deserted, Captain Belmont."

"Perhaps the family are away, up in Havana," answered the young officer, for he was youthful being scarcely over twenty-two.

"It may be," and Captain Belmont frowned.

But half an hour after he was walking toward the mansion.

He had dressed himself with unusual care, wearing his best uniform, and there had been a look of pleasant anticipation upon his face until he noted the appearance of desertion resting upon the place.

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As he reached the broad steps a man came toward him.

He was a man of middle age, wearing a white suit and Panama hat, and he saluted politely as he approached the sailor.

"I am Captain Belmont, senior, of the Mexican service, and I have come to visit Senor Rudolph, whom I once had the honor of serving some six months ago," said Belmont.

"Ah, Senor Captain, the one you seek is no longer alive."

"Dead! the Senor Rudolph dead?" cried Belmont excitedly.

"Alas! senor, he died two months ago, having been thrown from his horse and killed."

"Caramba! and his beautiful daughter?"

"Is now the Senora Rodriguez, Senor Captain."

Captain Frank Belmont turned livid, and his lips quivered so that his words came tremblingly from his lips.

"The Senorita Victorine is married, you say?"

"Yes, senor, she was married a month following your bringing her home, for she had gone to the States, you remember, with her father, to prepare her wardrobe for her marriage."

"And she is married?" mechanically said Belmont.

"Yes, senor."

"And one month after I brought her home?"

"Yes, Senor Captain."

"You are sure of this?"

"Oh, senor, I am the owner of the plantation, and drank the senor and senora's health at the wedding."

"And her husband?"

"Is the Senor Lieutenant Rafael Rodriguez, an officer of the Spanish Navy, though a Cuban-American, for his mother was an American lady, senor."

"And he is in the Spanish Navy?"

"Yes, senor, though he is now absent in Spain with his bride, and will resign his lieutenantancy and return here to the plantation to live."

"Ah!"

"Yes, senor."

"About when do you expect them here?"

"It will not be for a long while, Senor Captain, as they will visit other lands ere they return."

"And the Senor Rodriguez and his beautiful wife will make their home here?"

"Yes, Senor Captain; but I forget the hospitality due you, and crave your pardon."

"Let me ask you to become the guest of Senor Rodriguez and his bride, though absent, for I know how well thought of you are by them."

"No, thank you, I—" and as if suddenly changing his mind, Belmont continued:

"I am really sick of sea-fare, so will accept your kind offer for a few days to rest in, as I have seen hard service of late—that is, if it is not asking too much for you to open the mansion."

"No, senor, the house is ever ready to dispense hospitality, so remain as long as you deem it your pleasure."

The overseer then had the mansion thrown open, called up the house servants and Captain Belmont was made an honored guest, though the master and fair young mistress were absent.

Cespedes, the overseer, had often heard the Senor Rudolph and Victorine speak of the Mexican commander, and tell how much they owed to him in deepest gratitude, and he had also gotten a glimpse of the schooner going out to sea, when last there, with the two forms struggling at the rope end, so he felt a great awe of the cruiser's commander, but asked him, as he stood near, while Belmont smoked a cigarrito:

"Senor, it was thought that you punished with death, the two men who had plotted the death of Senor Rudolph, his daughter, and the made, Liza, when they were in the open boat?"

"Yes, they intended to kill the senor and those with him, and so I strung them up," was the cool reply.

"We all saw it, senor, and it showed you to be a true friend."

"Yes, I am a true friend, and unforgiving foe," and Belmont laughed; but it was a laugh that Overseer Cespedes did not like.

For days did Captain Belmont remain at the Cuban home, spending his time in driving, riding or hunting, but refusing the request of Cespedes to allow the neighboring planters to call upon him.

He preferred to be alone, and Cespedes thought that he was certainly a very stern, moody man, though ever polite to him.

At last he decided to again put to sea, and he called to Cespedes and said:

"You have been a most hospitable host to me, senor, and I wish to ask a favor of you."

"Yes, senor."

"I have written a letter here which I wish you to take over to your own quarters and to place in the hands of the Senora Victorine herself."

"I do not care to have her husband see it, though she can show it to him if so she wishes."

"It shall be as you desire, Senor Captain."

"Here is the letter, and it is sealed."

"And buy you a souvenir with this to remember me by," and Captain Belmont thrust into the hand of Cespedes a silk purse filled with gold.

"Oh, senor."

"Do not mention it, Cespedes."

"Good-by," and the sailor was gone, and Cespedes watched the schooner sail out to sea, happy in the thought that he was considerably richer by its coming.

Then he glanced at the letter given him, and he started as he saw the design upon the seal.

It was a human skull, and around it were the words:

"The World is Mine!"

CHAPTER IV.

THE VOW.

THE Senor Cespedes was a valuable man upon a plantation, for he did not need the eye of the master upon him to cause him to do his duty.

He was a good manager, kind to the several hundred slaves that belonged to the estate, and he kept the property up at its best.

His own quarters, over on the hillside half a mile from the mansion, were comfortable, and as he was a bachelor, he lived in comparative quiet.

One morning, some two months after the visit of Belmont, the Senor Cespedes, as was his wont on the Sabbath Day, strolled down to the mansion to see that all was well there.

In one of the outhouses near the large mansion, dwelt an old negro and his wife, whose only duty it was to keep the place well aired and clean.

Senor Cespedes was startled by suddenly beholding the old negro lying dead upon his own threshold, while within the door was his wife, and she too was lifeless.

There was a cutlass cut on the head of the old negro, a sword-thrust through the heart of the negress.

The overseer started back with a cry of horror, and then ran toward the mansion.

The rear door was locked, and he went around to the front.

There he beheld a door open, and upon it was stuck, with four daggers, a black flag, in the center of which was a grinning white skull, and about it the words:

"THE WORLD IS MINE!"

Senor Cespedes was aghast with dismay and horror.

He had a letter at his home, and upon the seal was the same sign and motto.

One glance into the mansion showed that it had been sacked from one end to the other.

All of its costly bric-a-brac, paintings and silver had been taken, and thousands of dollars' worth of things had been stolen in one night.

In the harbor, only the little boats belonging to the place had been taken, for the robber had gone.

Who had been the despoiler, Cespedes was assured.

And yet he determined to keep the secret to himself until the Senor Rodriguez and his wife should return.

But he ran to the plantation bell and rung it furiously to sound the alarm, and the slaves and the planters from adjoining plantations quickly gathered.

The dead bodies of the old negro and negress showed that the ruthless invaders had not stopped at cruelest crime, for they had slain them without mercy.

It was decided, of course, that a pirate crew had landed upon the coast and raided the mansion, and the adjoining planters at once organized a band for protection, and a close watch by day and night was to be kept, for there were other houses equally as valuable in furnishings that might readily be visited by the sea robbers.

But who that robber chief was, only Cespedes felt that he knew and he kept silent, while no one suspected for an instant the Mexican officer, who had saved Senor Rudolph and his daughter from death, and afterward had been the guest at the deserted home for a few days.

Slowly the months passed away to the anxious overseer, and at last, after over a year's absence, there ran into the harbor a vessel-of-war, flying the Spanish flag.

And on board of it was Lieutenant Rodriguez, his beautiful wife and a baby girl, the little one having been born upon the sea.

With his arrival at home the services of Lieutenant Rodriguez as a Spanish officer ended, and he turned over to the junior lieutenant the command of his vessel, and became a Cuban planter, giving up the sea, as he had hoped, forever.

Cespedes met the happy couple, and told them the story of the pirates' raid by night.

They felt deeply for the faithful old servants who had been killed, and regretted the loss of their property stolen, but they were rich and could replace that, and, happy in their love and their little baby girl, they were determined to allow no gloom to fall upon their lives.

The remembrance that her loved father, upon the hillside in the little family burying-ground,

was also a sorrow to Victorine; but she was happy with her loving husband, and seemed once more like a girl as she sped about the grounds of her old home.

She had started when Cespedes had told them of the visit of Captain Belmont, and how he had entertained him for several days, and Senor Rodriguez had said:

"God bless him! I wish he had remained longer, for he shall always hold a warm place in my heart, Victorine, after all he did for you."

Victorine made no reply, for she had kept from her husband the fact that Captain Belmont had told her he loved her, and had said that he meant to come and claim her as his bride.

Why she had held this from him as a secret she did not know herself, and yet she had not told him.

Some days after her arrival at home, Victorine took a walk alone to the little arbor on the hill, from whence a grand view of the coast, the sea and plantation grounds and mansion could be seen.

Her husband had ridden to the town, some miles away, and the baby, little Norma, was asleep, so that she was left to herself.

Cespedes was on the watch for just such an opportunity, and so seeing her going toward the overlook arbor, he hastened after the letter intrusted to his care by Belmont, and soon joined her there.

"Ah! Senor Cespedes, I am enjoying the fine view once more, and it seems like old times to be here; but let me thank you for your very great care of the place the fifteen months we were absent."

"And yet, senora, the place was robbed while you were away?"

"That was not your fault, good senor; but tell me, how appeared Captain Belmont when here?"

"Morose, senora, and stern."

"Said he aught of me?"

"He left this letter for me, senora, to place in your hands alone."

Victorine started, paled, and then her face flushed.

But she broke the letter open, without glancing at the seal, and Cespedes walked apart several paces to let her read it.

What she read caused her to flush with anger and then pale with dread.

It was as follows:

"SENORA VICTORINE:—

"I am seated in the room overlooking the spot where I told you I loved you."

"I am the guest of your house, rendered dear to me by association with you, and I wonder how strange it was that the ideal of womanhood I have idolized since my boyhood I should have picked up at sea."

"I loved you the moment my eyes met yours, and more, my dear Victorine, with one who possesses my nature it is to love but once in a lifetime."

"I have given you that one love of my life, and to my dying day I can love no other."

"I told you that I would come here for you to be my wife."

"You did not tell me that you were then engaged to another, and so I deemed that you loved me as I did you."

"But, even had you so told me it would have made no difference to me as you were the one that was intended for me alone."

"You have seen fit to become the bride of another, but I will forgive that if you will fly with me far away to other lands."

"If you refuse, then I vow that my vengeance shall fall upon the man you love, and when he is dead you shall become my wife."

"I make no idle vow, so be warned and obey my bidding."

"Some night we shall meet face to face, and then I shall ask you what has been your decision, so be ready."

"FRANK BELMONT,
"A Freelance of the Sea."

Twice did Victorine read this letter and then she called to Cespedes, while from her lips came the words:

"He makes no idle vow."

CHAPTER V.

KEEPING A SECRET.

"CESPEDES, did the Senor Captain hint to you what was in this letter?"

"No, my dear senora, but I can guess that its contents pain you, as your face reveals that much, and the after deeds of the Senor Captain showed what he was."

"His after deeds, Cespedes?"

"Yes, senora."

"Has he been here again?"

"Yes, senora."

"Ah! when?"

"You are alarmed, senora, so I pray you be calm."

"I am alarmed, for Captain Belmont made a threat in this letter."

"He has already executed it, Senora Victorine."

"I am in the dark, good Cespedes, at what you mean."

"Do you remember the flag, senora, that I found upon the door of the mansion after the visit of the pirates?"

"Yes, I have it as a souvenir of their cruel raid."

"You can describe it, senora?"

"Certainly."
 "What did you make it out, senora?"
 "A sable field, a human skull, snow-white, and encircling it in red letters the words:

"THE WORLD IS MINE."

"Yes, senora; but do you remember if Captain Belmont had a flag?"

"A Mexican flag of course, though he displayed no colors while we were upon his schooner."

"Will you look at that seal, my lady, on the letter he has written you?"

With a slight start Victorine obeyed and a cry escaped her as she beheld it.

"Holy Mother save me! it is the same as the flag!"

"The same, senora."

"Do you mean, Cespedes, that this man, Captain Belmont, was the pirate who landed here and sacked our house, killing those two faithful old slaves?"

"Without doubt, senora."

"Can it be so?"

"He passed days here, senora, as an honored guest, and thus learned how easy it was to rob your home, and what was the most valuable to take."

"I remember seeing him roaming from room to room and then asking as to the value of the paintings."

"Then you believe Captain Belmont to be a pirate?"

"Is not there a sea rover who is known as Belmont the Buccaneer, senora?"

"Ha! I have heard of such a sea outlaw, Cespedes."

"Cannot this mar be he?"

"Assuredly, only he treated us so well, and seemed so much of a gentleman, while he claimed that his vessel was a Mexican cruiser."

"True, but many a gentleman, senora, has turned out a pirate, and this man certainly is one, and I fear we have cause to dread him."

"So fear I, good Cespedes; but, for the present, I will keep this from my husband."

"I will retain this letter to show him; but I will not worry him just now, and yet, as Captain Belmont here signs himself as 'A Freelance of the Sea,' I wish you, Senor Cespedes, to be on your guard for any strange sail that may appear, for the schooner may return here again."

"It may, senora, and I will be on the watch for it," and Cespedes, having told Victorine that she could trust him not to betray the secret they held between them, went back toward his quarters.

In the mean time Victorine had a little struggle with herself as to what was right for her to do.

She had not told her husband of Belmont's confession of love, nor even her father, and yet just why she had not she could not herself understand.

She had kept it a secret, hoping that Belmont, if he did return, would find her married and gone and thus let the matter drop.

She had not told Belmont of her engagement, as she felt there was no need of doing so, until he told his love for her, and then she had not a chance to make it known and so had allowed him to depart with the avowed determination to return some day and claim her for his wife.

Now she had a letter from him making dire threats, and she knew that he had not only returned, but was in fact no other than the buccaneer whose fame as a cruel sea rover had spread from sea to sea.

Still, not wishing to alarm her husband, or to excite his jealous nature, she kept the matter secret.

Soon after her return to the mansion Senor Rodriguez arrived at home, and he stated that he would have to go to Havana the next day upon important business.

And it was with a sad heart, and a foreboding of evil that Victorine saw him depart.

The evening after the departure of her husband for Havana was a beautiful one, luring Victorine to a stroll in the grounds by moonlight, for Liza was with little Norma; in fact the pretty negress considered the infant her especial property and seldom left it.

Approaching a clump of orange trees, in which was a rustic seat from whence a view of the ocean could be seen, Victorine sat down and became lost in the beauty of the scene.

Suddenly a shadow fell upon her and her heart stood still almost, as she beheld the tall form of Belmont standing before her.

CHAPTER VI.

THE THREAT.

To save her life, had a movement depended upon it, Victorine could not move.

There was no large vessel in the little harbor, for the moonlight revealed its waters distinctly, broken only by the plantation yacht, lugger and fishing smack, with several skiffs drawn out upon the sunny sands.

The man had therefore come by some other way than into the harbor in his schooner.

True, he could have landed down the coast, a league or two away, and walked up to Buena

Vista Plantation, and he must have been on the water to have seen Victorine go to the orange arbor alone.

Did any one know of his being there?

How thoroughly in his power she was.

Such were the thoughts which flashed through the brain of the beautiful woman as she beheld Captain Belmont before her, and she was unable to move or speak with dread.

And he too seemed in no hurry to speak, for, folding his arms he stood in silence before her.

At last the man spoke.

"Is this my welcome, Senora Rodriguez, after nearly two years since last we met?"

His voice seemed to break the charm, or spell, under which Victorine was, and she regained her presence of mind at once.

"I know not, senor, whether to welcome one to whom I owe so much of gratitude, as a Mexican officer, or as a pirate," she said, rising and facing him.

"Ah! you confound me with Belmont the Buccaneer?"

"Are you not that sea rover?"

"Suppose I say nay?"

"I shall be heartily glad to feel that I do not owe my life to a pirate."

"Suppose I say yea."

"Then Heaven have mercy upon you, senor."

"Do you remember our last meeting, senora?"

"Can I forget it, senor?"

"Do you remember that I told you I loved you?"

"I do."

"Do you recall my promise to come after you and make you my wife?"

"Senor Captain, I can never forget that scene, for you told me that you loved me, in a passionate, earnest way, at the same time urging me not to speak to my father just then of what you said, and, without awaiting a word from me you told me that you would come to make me your wife."

"I was more than full of gratitude to you for my life, and I admired you, believing you an honorable, noble man, while I could not but feel flattered at your love; but ere reply could be made my father joined us, and you sailed soon after, or you should have known that I already loved another, and was to marry him in a very short while."

"But, you did not know this, and you returned after I had become the wife of another and was far away."

"I came back, with my husband and child, and I received your letter; nay, more, I learned that it was you who had come here and wrecked my home, killed my faithful old servants, and I read your threat in the words written to me, so that, from your actions, your words, the flag left by the midnight raiders, and the seal upon your missive to me, I can only believe that in you I see a pirate, none other in fact, senor, than Belmont the Buccaneer."

Victorine had spoken with deep earnestness, which showed that she was very much moved.

The man had listened to her in silence, and when she had ceased speaking he said:

"Senora, in my letter I told you that I could love but one woman. That is true, and you are that woman."

"I was born a gentleman, as far as my family went, but it seems there was a natural devil within me to drive me to the bad. With good impulses I yet commit crime, and it was because I went to the bad and had to go to prison, that I took to the sea and became a rover."

"I tried to live an honorable life, so enlisted in the service of Mexico, and pluck made me commander of a cruiser."

"But the Satan within me kept my best nature down, and I turned my craft into a pirate just one month before I found you afloat in that open boat at sea."

"I made renewed good resolves, and had you become my wife I would have kept them."

"But I came here to find you the wife of another, and my every good resolve was broken."

"My Government did not know that I had turned pirate, so I smoothed over my acts with my crew, and after leaving here, went back to honest service again."

"But when I discovered that you had married another, I again hoisted my sable flag and began a life of sea-outlawry which I believe you will do me the justice to say has made the name of Belmont the Buccaneer quite famous and much dreaded."

"Now I have come back here to see you, to get a response to my letter."

"You shall soon have it, Senor Pirate."

"Hold! do not say aught that you will regret, until you have heard me."

"What more have you to say, senor?"

"I would say that I love you far more than ever, and if you will pledge your word to become my wife upon the death of your husband, I will go from you to-night and lead an honest life."

"Go, sir, for you are insulting!"

"Is it an insult to offer an honest love?"

"Such love as you offer is not honorable, but an insult. Go, sir!"

"And you refuse?"

"I certainly do!"

"Remember, I will raise no hand to destroy your husband, only I ask, should he die, will you, after a year of mourning, become my wife?"

"Never!"

"I will lead an honest life from this day, if you will so promise."

"Never! Go from me!"

"You command this?"

"I do."

"I am not one to be cast off with impunity."

"I do not fear you," was the bold reply, and yet the quivering lips and trembling form belied her brave words.

"I have made a vow that you shall be mine some day."

"Begone, pirate, or I will call for aid."

He gazed a moment upon her, then said, in a low, vicious tone:

"I have warned you, so upon your head be what comes."

So saying he walked away along the ridge path, and after watching him until he disappeared from sight in the moonlight, Victorine turned and fled toward the mansion like a frightened deer.

CHAPTER VII.

THE INSULT.

THERE was no American vessel-of-war in the harbor of Havana at the time of the scene which I am now about to describe, but a lieutenant of the United States Navy was passing a few weeks' leave there.

He was a handsome fellow, and having met several well-known citizens of the town, was introduced at the Assembly Rooms of the officers of the Spanish Navy and Army.

He dressed in full uniform, was very winning in manner, and became a favorite at once, while reputed to be very rich, and certainly staked large sums at the gaming-table, and at times lost heavily.

"Have you met that handsome American senor, Rodriguez?" asked a Spanish major one night of Rafael Rodriguez, as the two stood together in the Assembly Rooms at Havana.

"No, and I am anxious to, for I am always most friendly to the Americans, my brother having been a native of that country, you remember," said Rafael Rodriguez in response.

He was a fine-looking young man, quite youthful, for he was scarcely over twenty-three, yet had won fame while in the navy of Spain, and for the hand of the beautiful heiress, Victorine Rudolph, he had had many rivals.

But to be cut out by such a splendid fellow as was Rodriguez, his disappointed rivals had said was no disgrace.

So he had won Victorine, and resigning from the navy had settled down to the life of a planter.

He spoke English almost without an accent, and was therefore glad to be presented to the United States lieutenant, who was known as Senor Belden Montrose.

The two senors met with a pleasant grasp of the hands when presented to each other by Major Mendez, and, as gambling at cards was a most fashionable amusement in those days, as now, it was not long before there was a game in progress at a table in a little reception-room.

The four at the table consisted of Major Mendez and Senor Rodriguez, who were playing as partners, and the American lieutenant, Belden Montrose, who had as his partner also an American, who had accompanied him to the Assembly Rooms.

He introduced his friend as Senor Conrad, the captain of an American merchant vessel then in port, and the major and Rafael Rodriguez voted them both splendid comrades.

A few of the club members dropped in to see the game, when the attendant servant whispered outside that the stakes were growing very large, and, as the figures went up into the thousands of pesos on a bet, Major Mendez said that he must withdraw.

The American, Captain Conrad, also withdrew, and the game was left to be played out by Senor Rodriguez the rich Cuban planter, and Lieutenant Belden Montrose.

A large crowd had now gathered, and the deepest interest was felt in the game by all, as the stakes had gone up as high as five thousand pesos.

The American officer had been a steady loser, but pluckily kept up his bets, though Senor Rodriguez had several times offered to end the game where it was.

"No, I never back down, senor, in the face of a foe," was the stern remark, and many were surprised at it.

"Do you look upon me, senor, as a foe?"

"I certainly hope not," the Cuban had responded with a pleasant smile.

Quick and cutting came the response:

"I look upon any man as a foe, senor, who is a cheat at cards, and I am only playing to catch you in the act."

A cry of indignation went around the table at this, and a stinging blow in the face was dealt by Rafael Rodriguez upon his insulter, while he said earnestly:

"Senors, you know me, and I appeal to you

for justice against this man, a stranger, treated as a gentleman in our midst."

Instantly the feeling of the crowd was expressed in favor of the Cuban, whose high sense of honor all knew, as against the charge of the American.

But Lieutenant Montrose at once said:

"Senor, I gave you the name of card-cheat for I believe you are no better than such, and you have resented it with a blow."

"If you are not a coward you will give me satisfaction."

"Willingly, senor, when and where you demand," was the prompt response.

"Senor Captain, may I ask you to act for me, and arrange with the friend of Senor Rodriguez for any weapons that may please him, and also the time and place?" and turning in a courtly way Lieutenant Belden Montrose left the Assembly Rooms.

He wended his way along the streets to a small hotel in a quiet street, and was soon seated in a pleasant room, a bottle of Spanish wine before him.

It was not long before he was joined by his second, and looking up he quietly asked:

"Well?"

"To-morrow at sunrise, outside of the city gate on the shore, and the weapons are swords."

"Time, place and weapons suit, my good friend."

"Now join me in a glass of wine before you return to your vessel, and I will meet you at the field on time; but you had better be ready to sail, for I shall kill him."

"I shall leave port to-night, sir, and go to the field by boat along the coast," was the reply of the second, and ten minutes after he took his leave of Lieutenant Belden Montrose.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE DUELLO BY THE SEA.

At an early hour the next morning, a *volante* containing three persons drove out of the city of Havana, and went at a swift pace along a road leading to the coast.

As it drew rein upon a lonely spot, sheltered by a clump of trees, a boat came in sight.

In the boat were two oarsmen and a person at the helm.

Hardly had the boat touched the shore, at a point near where the *volante* stood, when the man in the stern sprung out, and giving an order to the oarsmen they placed a small trunk and bundle ashore and then pulled back toward the harbor.

As they did so another boat came in sight, and it too contained two oarsmen and a person in the stern at the tiller.

The men were rowing rapidly, as though late, and soon reached the shore, when the occupant leaped out, holding in his arms a suspicious-looking package enveloped in buckskin and which had the appearance of being a pair of swords bound together.

The first comers in the *volante*, were Rafael Rodriguez, his second, Major Mendez and the surgeon of the major's regiment.

The one who came in the first boat, which had put back to town, was Belden Montrose, who had picked a quarrel with the young Cuban planter the night before at the Assembly Rooms, and who, though supposed to be a lieutenant in the United States Navy, the reader has doubtless ere this recognized as none other than Captain Belmont, who, a few days before, had visited Victorine after the departure of her husband for Havana.

The party in the second boat was Carlos Conrad, first officer of the schooner of Belmont, and which had boldly run into the Cuban port with the guns in the hold and disguised as a merchant craft.

Leaving the harbor by night, Conrad had sought a place upon the coast a few leagues away, where his vessel could remain in hiding, while he had taken a boat and rowed rapidly to the scene of the *duello*.

That he was a little late he saw, and that the supposed American lieutenant and his second had not come together, or even from the same direction, was also noted by the party in the *volante*.

But with a courteous bow Belmont greeted the party, and turning to Carlos Conrad, who just then came up, said, quietly:

"Pray arrange matters expeditiously, Captain Conrad, as I wish to be off as soon as possible."

The party who were to meet the young American overheard this, and it caused them to feel that the speaker had wonderful confidence in himself.

They also noted that he had not brought a surgeon with him, and this further proved that he anticipated no trouble for himself.

But Rafael Rodriguez, his second and surgeon knew, was a skilled swordsman.

None better had been found in the Spanish Navy, and he was a man who always kept himself well up in practice.

Then, too, his courage was something that had won for him fame in many a close encounter.

The preliminaries were soon arranged, the rapiers placed in the hands of the two principals,

who were both perfectly cool and confident, it seemed.

As they faced each other, Belmont said, in a low tone:

"You must fight for your life, Senor Rodriguez, for I am here to kill you."

"Ah, senor, so be it," was the reply, and Rafael Rodriguez seemed to feel for the first time that his adversary had a grudge against him, and the accusation of the night before was but a scheme to force him into a fight.

The swords crossed, the sparks flying as they clashed together.

Then the combat was begun in deadly earnest, The Spanish major and surgeon were surprised not to see the American at once disarmed by Rafael Rodriguez; but, it was not as they wished, for Belmont, after a short combat, began to prove himself the superior of the Cuban in both strength and skill, and the buccaneer catching his chance drove his blade deep into the heart of his adversary.

Rafael Rodriguez sunk into the arms of his surgeon, while Belmont, raising his hat politely, turned and walked toward the boat, where he directed the two men to place his trunk and the package into it.

In a short while Carlos Conrad joined him there, and as he did so the *volante* was seen to roll rapidly away from the spot, back toward the town.

"Well, Conrad?" asked Belmont, quietly, as his lieutenant approached.

"You have given him his death-wound, senor, for the surgeon said there was scarcely a ray of hope."

Belmont smiled grimly, and then said:

"Well, let us return to the schooner. How far is she from here?"

"Two leagues, senor."

"We will soon make it," and away the boat started under the strong pull of the two oarsmen.

Within little over an hour's time the boat ran into a cove, where the schooner lay at anchor, the crew busy getting her guns up from the hold and mounted.

The work was soon completed and the pretty craft flew seaward while up to her peak went her pirate flag, with its black field, white skull and strange motto:

"The World is Mine!"

CHAPTER IX.

FROM BAD TO WORSE.

FRANK BELMONT was born rich, and his family boasted a long line of aristocratic ancestry.

But Frank, of whom so much was expected, was doomed to be a black sheep, for he was so wild as a small boy that his father, a dweller upon the South Carolina coast, got him an appointment in the navy.

Thoroughly bad at heart, though with the face and form of an Apollo, he was not very long in the navy before he was forced to leave it in disgrace.

And yet, for seamanship and courage he had been known as the best among his comrades.

Returning home, he had soon gotten into any number of scrapes, which had culminated in his running off to sea and shipping before the mast.

For a long while nothing was heard of him; but one day a vessel came into Baltimore, flying her flag with the Union down, and on board she had a dead mate, slain by one of the crew, a mere boy.

The mate had reproved him, without cause, it was said, and when the youth had resented it, he struck him.

Wild with rage, the boy had sprung upon him and driven a knife into his heart.

Into irons he was put, and the next day the vessel reached port.

The craft belonged to a large shipping merchant, whose son, a boy of fourteen, was wont to sail down the harbor in a little cat-rigged craft, and board his father's in-coming vessels.

He had done so in this case, and thus learned the story of the murder, and also had gone down to see the prisoner.

Instead of a burly young man of twenty, he had seen a handsome, daring-faced lad of eighteen, who took his unfortunate situation with an air of seemingly utter indifference.

He had greeted the boy, Carlos Conrad, pleasantly, and remarked:

"I suppose you will attend my hanging,"

"But will they hang you?"

"Sure."

"I hope not, for I think I can understand that you acted on impulse, angered at the words and blow of the mate."

"That won't count with those who try me."

"I killed Mate Bronson, and I'll hang."

Carlos Conrad was silent, but his thoughts were busy.

The next morning the vessel would arrive in port.

His little sail-boat was towing astern of the barque, and if the prisoner was set free he could get out of the stern ports, slip down the line into the boat, cut loose, and in the darkness not be noticed.

"Have you any money?" he asked.

"A few dollars."

"The captain has the keys to unlock your irons?"

"Yes."

"And he is ill in his berth, so I will get them and set you free, for I don't wish to see you hang."

"Will you do this for me?" eagerly asked the young prisoner.

"Yes, if I can."

"You can, for you've got the nerve to do it, and I'll never forget you."

"You'll be a good young man if I let you go?"

"Yes, for this has been my closest call, and has been a lesson to me."

"I have been a bad boy all my life."

"You don't look it."

"Appearances are deceitful," was the response.

"Well, I'll go and get the keys and unlock your irons."

"Then I'll keep watch, and at the proper time let you know when to start, and you can slip through the cabin, and you will find the boat has several days' stores on board."

"What kind of boat?"

"A cat-rig, with a small cabin; but she's stiff as a church, and I have often run down to the entrance to the bay to meet my father's in-coming vessels."

"It makes a sailor of me, you know."

"This is your father's vessel?"

"Yes."

"What is your name?"

"Carlos Conrad, and my father is a Baltimore shipping merchant, and I'll be a captain some day."

"You are a splendid fellow, Master Carlos Conrad, and I'll never forget you if you help me out of this scrape."

"Here is thirty dollars for you, and it is all I have."

"I will accept it as a loan, for some day I will pay it back."

"Now get the keys and free me of these irons."

Carlos Conrad had the free run of the vessel.

He was known upon all his father's ships, and the men liked the brave, handsome boy, who alone in his little boat, was wont to meet them many leagues from port.

The captain was suffering from an attack of sickness, and so that aided the boy in carrying out his plan, and so well did he plot that several hours after nightfall a form crouched in a vacant state-room of the cabin awaiting a signal to reach the stern port and descend into the boat towing astern.

The second mate was pacing to and fro amidships, and the watch were gathered forward, while the barque was dashing swiftly along on her way up the Chesapeake, anxious to reach Baltimore in the early morning.

The wind was not very strong, and so there was but one man at the wheel, and Carlos Conrad was entertaining him with the news in port.

Soon the boy stepped forward and sat down upon the cabin skylight, while he still talked to the helmsman.

Then, as though by accident, he gave three blows on the skylight with his knife.

The form in the state-room started at this, opened the door and glanced out.

Then he glided across through the open port, down the tow-line of the cat-boat and next instant was adrift, for he had unfastened the rope.

Carlos Conrad saw, as he glanced sternward, the mast of the cat-boat as it dropped astern, and he talked on the more rapidly, while he glanced aloft at the lookout.

But the lookout's eyes were ahead on the course, and the cat-boat dropped out of sight astern.

Then Carlos Conrad ceased to be entertaining to the helmsman, yawned as though half asleep and said:

"I guess I'll turn in."

But he was "turned out" early the next morning, when the barque ran into the harbor and for the first time the discovery was made that the boat was missing.

Then the prisoners' escape was made known; but who had been his ally no one knew, until a sailor, a hang-dog sort of fellow, was suspected and immediately arrested.

Then Carlos Conrad at once went to his father and confessed all, to save the sailor, and the stern old man felled the boy at his feet with a severe blow, and then kicked him out of his home, telling him he was no better than the murderer.

Out of his home went Carlos Conrad, his brain and heart on fire, and when the next day the anger of the old shipping merchant cooled and he was able to see matters more clearly, he sent for his boy to return home.

But he could not be found, and the captain and crew of none of the vessels had seen him.

The boy had obeyed his father and departed, "never again to darken the doors of an honest home," as had been the last words that Carlos, bleeding and suffering had heard ringing in his ears as he fled from his father's cruel wrath.

CHAPTER X.

UPON A PIRATE'S DECK.

A BOAT attack from an American vessel-of-war had just been made upon a small armed brig lying at anchor in a lagoon upon the coast of Florida.

The brig was a pirate craft, one that had been a scourge to honest merchant vessels in the Gulf of Mexico, and a large price was offered for the head of her Commander Mora, the West Indian Buccaneer Chief, and a man of most vicious mercilessness.

The brig had fled for refuge into the lagoon, and, unable to follow her the sloop-of-war had sent an attacking force in boats.

But the force had been unequal to the contest, and, though the crew of one of the boats had reached the pirate's deck, they had been all beaten back, except four, who were wounded and made prisoners.

One of the prisoners was a mere youth of nineteen, and he had been the first to reach the deck of the pirate, and several of the outlaws had fallen under the deadly sweep of his cutlass.

But he had twice been wounded, and, as the other boats were beaten off, the attack was a failure, leaving the youth and three of his brave comrades upon the deck of the outlaw.

"Rig a plank and bring irons, for these devils shall quickly walk to their death!" yelled Mora, the chief, who was a heavily bearded savage-faced man, and he was livid with rage at the attack made upon him.

The pirate crew sprung nimbly to obey the bidding of their chief, and the youth and his companions heard their doom without emotion.

The plank was soon rigged over the side, and the men placed in irons, with solid shot attached to sink them into the depths of the lagoon.

Just as Mora was about to give the order for them to go to their death, a boat came alongside and a tall form sprung upon the deck.

"Did you find an outlet from this trap into the sea?" shouted the chief.

"I did, senior, and the boats can tow through the lagoon into the open water and thus escape the sloop-of-war; but you beat off the boat attack?" said the young man, who evidently stood in the position of first officer.

"I did, and captured three or four devils, who shall now walk the plank," was the angry retort.

The moon shone brightly into the faces of the four men, and there was something in one of them that caught the eye of the pirate lieutenant, for he stepped quickly toward him and took a closer look.

"Have you not seen me before?" he asked, while Mora and the pirate crew looked on.

"Is not your name Frank Belmont?" asked the young prisoner.

"It is, and you are Carlos Conrad?"

"I am."

"What are you doing here, lad, as a sailor on a vessel-of-war? Give me your hand for old times' sake, for I have never forgotten you, lad, though my letters to you remained unnoticed," and Frank Belmont, the pirate lieutenant, grasped the hand, ironed though the wrists were, of the boy who had, five years before, saved him from the gallows.

"Here, Belmont, we have no time to delay with your sentimental nonsense, so bid the fellow farewell and let him die," cried the chief.

"No, Captain Mora, this lad must not die, for he saved my life once, and I'll risk mine now to save him," was the bold reply.

"Will he join us if I spare him?" asked Mora, who was greatly attached to his young lieutenant.

"You hear what the chief says, Conrad?"

"Yes."

"Will you join us?"

"No, and I am surprised and sorry to see you a pirate."

"Could not help it, boy, for it was all that was open to me. I tried to be honest, but went downward instead of upward."

"You had better promise."

"No."

"You will have to die if you do not, while I will save you if you do."

"Will you spare my comrades also?"

"How about that, chief?" and Frank Belmont turned to the chief.

"No indeed! They must die, and the boy, too."

"I say no, chief!"

"You dare me?" and with a bound Mora sprung with uplifted cutlass toward his lieutenant, for it made a madman of him to be met with opposition.

"I dare you, Chief Mora, if you attempt to make that young man walk the plank," was the undaunted reply, and the hand of the lieutenant dropped upon his cutlass-hilt.

Chief Mora was enraged beyond control, and with a cry such as a hyena might utter, he sprung upon the young outlaw officer, while the men stood aghast.

The cutlasses clashed; there were small circles of light, like writhing serpents, and Chief Mora dropped to the deck dead, cut down by Frank Belmont!

"Ho, lads, to your posts, and get your boats out ahead to tow out of this, or we'll all hang!"

"Lively, lads, lively! for that sloop-of-war did not send half her force, and others are coming!"

The ringing words of Frank Belmont broke the spell which the death of their chief caused to fall upon the crew.

Their lieutenant was a favorite with all, and known to be a most skillful commander and daring officer, while the chief was dreaded and hated.

By the crew, the change of commanders was not regretted, and yet, but for their own danger and the quick orders of the lieutenant, there were men among them, led by an under officer, who would have caused trouble.

The four prisoners, still in irons, were sent below into the cabin, the boats were got out ahead, the anchor hauled up, and the brig was swiftly towed further into the lagoon, and thence, by a way discovered by Frank Belmont in the gig, half an hour before, through a network of bayous out into the sea.

Just as the dawn broke, the brig went flying away over the blue waters of the Gulf, leaving the sloop-of-war two leagues down the coast awaiting the return of her boats, which a second time had gone to attack the pirate craft in its lair.

Thus, after five years, had Frank Belmont and Carlos Conrad again met, the one an officer on a pirate vessel, and the other a seaman on board of an American vessel-of-war, instead of, as he had hoped to be, captain of a fine clipper ship of his father's merchant fleet.

CHAPTER XI.

FOR GOOD OR EVIL.

DURING the run through the lagoons the body of the pirate chief had been dropped overboard, along with the other dead, killed in the attack by the boats, and the wounded sent below.

When the brig was at sea, and day had dawned, Frank Belmont went into the cabin and took the irons off the four prisoners.

To three of them he said:

"Go forward among the men and do your duty, if you wish to save your lives."

"If you refuse you walk the plank."

"Which shall it be?"

The men were only too anxious to escape their dread fate, and went quickly forward and reported for duty, while the pirate crew eyed them with a look that plainly showed that they knew they were only playing pirate to avoid death.

"Well, mate, it has been a trifle over five years since last we met!" said Frank Belmont, grasping the hand of the young sailor.

"Yes, and changes seem to have come upon us both," replied Carlos Conrad.

"Yes, and though I fought against an evil life, you see I was not strong enough."

"Through you I escaped the gallows, your boat served me a good turn, I assure you, and I sold it in Norfolk for a fair price and then shipped on a coaster."

"We were captured by Mora the pirate, and I shipped with him to save my neck, for he had a bad habit of making prisoners walk the plank, as you know."

"I intended to escape when I could do so but put it off until one day he made me bo'sen, and then a mate's berth followed and next I got to be second in command."

"So it went on until to-night, when you find me in command of a pirate brig and crew of cut-throats!"

"But will the crew submit?"

"They must; but tell me of yourself."

"It is soon told, for I owned up, when I found that a sailor was suspected of setting you free, and my father gave me a beating and drove me from my home!"

"I am sorry for this!"

"It was the fault of circumstances!"

"And then?"

"I shipped as cabin boy on a vessel leaving Philadelphia, to which port I walked, and a year after went on board of an American vessel-of-war which came into Havana where I then was."

"I began as powder-monkey and rose to be gunner, and to-night my career was cut short by my capture, as you know."

"Well, what do you wish to do now?"

"I suppose there is little choice left me."

"Well, you can act as my first luff for the present."

"And you intend to continue your piracies?"

"What else is there to be done?"

"A life of honor might still be before you, though it is a little late in the day to begin."

"Do you mean for me to give up the sea?"

"Oh, no."

"What then?"

"When our vessel was in the Vera Cruz I found out that the Mexican Government was trying to fit out a small navy, and I determined, when my time of shipment ended, to go back and secure an officer's berth, for one was offered to me by an official whose life I saved one night."

"He told me that the Government would pay a good price for an armed vessel, and give com-

missions to Americans who were able to command, so why can you not run your brig to Vera Cruz and turn her into a Mexican cruiser?"

"They'd hang me."

"They need not know that you have been a pirate."

"As it is, you lead a lawless life, and your neck is in a noose, while in the Mexican service you can at least be regarded with honor, and hold high rank."

"You plan well, my friend, and I will be influenced for good by you, for I believe my crew will be glad to change their colors."

"If I decide, will you be my first luff?"

"Yes, for my time of service in the navy ran out a month ago, and I was only waiting to reach port to go to Mexico."

"And your comrades?"

"Will go with me."

"Well, I will run down to the vicinity of Vera Cruz, send you to the town, and trust you to make all arrangements, and, if satisfactory, will once more try to start right with the world."

"Now I'll have a talk with my crew, and we will go armed to the teeth, for we know not just what will happen."

Frank Belmont and his new lieutenant then went on deck, and in a few words the former told the crew that there was a chance for them to take their necks out of the noose their crimes had put about them.

"The treasures of Chief Mora, I will divide among you, lads, and then we'll sail under honest colors."

"Does any man wish to do otherwise?"

There was not a dissenting voice, and the fleet brig was put away for Vera Cruz, and arriving off the coast Carlos Conrad was landed and made his way to the town.

Two days after he returned, and the result of his visit was that the pirate craft was metamorphosed into the Mexican brig-of-war Sea Eagle, with Captain Frank Belmont in command and Carlos Conrad as first lieutenant.

But, after a short-lived life of honesty the evil nature of Frank Belmont again broke out, and he could not keep his hands off a richly freighted Spanish craft, and so made her his prize.

Dragged into the whirlpool of crime with his captain, Carlos Conrad was forced to see the Mexican flag give place to the sable ensign with its white skull and motto, and thus it was that a swift schooner, which had taken the place of the brig, was turned into a pirate craft and the name of Belmont the Buccaneer began to be a terror upon the seas.

It was while upon a piratical cruise that Frank Belmont had picked up the boat containing the Cuban planter Rudolph, and his beautiful daughter, and what followed, up to the duel on the sea-coast has been already told, so now the thread of my story can be taken up again and followed to the end.

CHAPTER XII.

THE MYSTERY SOLVED.

THE surgeon who accompanied Rafael Rodriguez to the dueling field, that morning on the Cuban coast, was mistaken, for the wound given him by Frank Belmont was not fatal.

It is true that it was well-nigh so; but the keen point of the sword had missed touching the vital spark of life by a mere scratch, and so near to dying did the wounded man go that the papers stated that he was dead.

In a West Indian port, some weeks after the duel, Frank Belmont had read of the death of the man who stood between himself and Victorine, and he smiled with grim satisfaction as he said:

"She will not know Belden Montrose, the supposed American lieutenant as Belmont the Buccaneer, so will not look upon me as the slayer of her husband, and so will not abhor me."

But in the meantime the man he supposed was dead was hanging between life and death.

Victorine had been sent for, and she hastened to Havana with all speed to reach the side of her wounded husband.

She had expected to find him dead, from the report sent her by the surgeon, so was surprised to find him alive and that there was an atom of hope.

Day and night she lingered by the side of her husband, until at last life's pendulum swung strong and steady once more.

He had come from out the very jaws of death.

The first opportunity she had she had decided to take her husband back to his home, knowing that the change would do him good.

By easy stages the drive was made, and at last Rafael Rodriguez lay in his bed, looking out upon the sea, and with the balmy, flower-scented breezes fanning his brow, and every hope that after his months of suffering a few more weeks would find him a well man.

During her stay in Havana Victorine had heard of the duel, and what had led to it.

She knew also that all felt that the supposed American lieutenant had accused her husband of cheating at cards to bring about a duel with him, having some sinister motive to kill him.

Major Mendez had made inquiries, of other

American naval officers coming into port, regarding Lieutenant Belden Montrose, and was told there was no such officers in their navy.

Other inquiries were made, and the result was that "Lieutenant Belden Montrose" could not be found.

Then it became known that the American merchant craft, under command of one Captain Carlos Conrad, had left port the night before the duel.

It was remembered that the alleged lieutenant and merchant captain had not come together to the field, but in different boats and in different directions.

Another suspicious circumstance was that the "lieutenant" had not been seen after the duel, and a visit to his rooms showed that he had left there.

But another discovery was made also, and that was he had left in his room a paper upon which was written the date of every merchant craft that was expected to sail, or to arrive in port within the next two months, with some data as to about where they could be met at sea on certain dates.

This was a suspicious circumstance, and it was rendered more suspicious by the fact that a roll of flags had also been left in the rooms of the absent man.

These flags were new, having evidently just been made, and were several in number.

But the strangest part was that the flags were of a very suspicious kind for an honest man to be in possession of.

Their field was black, and in the center was a white skull, while, encircling the skull in red letters were the words:

"The World is Mine!"

All these things were reported to Victorine, and she at once said to Major Mendez:

"Describe the man, senor."

"Tall, broad-shouldered, and sinewy in form, with a face that was almost as brown as a Spaniard's, fine features, a pleasant smile, and the eye of an eagle, for it fairly seemed to be liquid fire as he fought your husband, though otherwise he was perfectly calm."

"Did you observe whether he wore a seal ring?"

"He did, on the little finger of his left hand."

"I noticed it after."

"Describe it, please."

"A black stone, with white center and circle of red about it, set in a frame of massive gold—*Caramba!* it was the same as the flags found in his room, now I recall it; but he never allowed a close inspection of it."

"I know the man, Major Mendez," said Victorine, calmly.

"You know him, Senora Rodriguez?"

"Yes."

"Who is he?"

"He is not an American officer, nor is his name Belden Montrose."

"You surprise me, senora."

"I will surprise you still more when I tell you that he is none other than Belmont, the Buccaneer."

Major Mendez was on his feet in an instant, while he said through his shut teeth:

"I believe you are right, Senor Rodriguez."

"I know that I am, senor."

"And this is the man whom we made a guest of our club and entertained right royally?"

"Why we must keep this a secret, or we will be laughed at, and so keeping it some day he may come back, and then we will have him in our clutches."

"I fear not, for he is a bold, cunning man, Major Mendez," was the reply of Victorine.

And so it was, a few weeks after this conversation she took her husband back with her to Buena Vista Plantation, well knowing how cruelly had Belmont the Buccaneer tried to carry out his threat.

"And will he come again?" she asked herself over and over again, and the dread that he would do so grew and grew daily upon her, until her alarm became so great that she urged her husband, who had now regained his health and strength, to move to Havana and make it their home.

CHAPTER XIII.

A DREAD REALIZED.

THE wound received by Senor Rodriguez became perfectly healed in time.

The charge of fraud against him, at the card-table, he saw was believed by a few and he was stung to the quick by it.

And because the man calling himself Belden Montrose, and claiming to be a lieutenant in the American Navy, was not known publicly to have been proven to be an impostor, and to be suspected of being none other than a free rover chief, Rafael Rodriguez, who had several enemies, was compelled to live under suspicion of a few.

At last the dread of Victorine, of greater evil to come, became so great that she decided to tell her husband all, for she saw that he was adverse to moving to Havana, and could not understand her reason for wishing to do so.

So Victorine one afternoon, while the two were seated upon the piazza overlooking the sea,

told her husband of Frank Belmont's avowal of love to her, of his saying that he would come to marry her, and afterward of the visit he had made when he had given to Cespedes the letter for her.

This letter she showed to him, and also made known that he had surprised her by a visit there one night, only a short while before the duel, and that he had gone from there to Havana to meet him in deadly combat.

What Major Mendez had discovered she also made known, and in truth made a complete confession, and then added:

"Now, my dear Rafael, you know why I wish to leave the plantation here and go to Havana to live."

"There we will be safe, and we can dwell in security until this bold buccaneer has met his fate."

"Here we may expect a visit from him at any time, and what the result of his coming will be I leave for you to picture."

"Now, Rafael, shall we go to Havana to live, at least until we know we are free from this man's persecution?"

"Gladly," was the response of Rafael Rodriguez, who had listened in deepest astonishment to all that his wife had told him.

He felt hurt that she had not before told him all, but yet he could not blame her, and he said:

"It is best, under the circumstances, Victorine, that we go to Havana, so make your arrangements accordingly."

"I can secure a good home there, and I will ask it as a personal favor of all Spanish naval officers to keep a bright lookout for this buccaneer."

"If they fail to capture him within a given time, I will fit out a vessel at my own expense and arm it, to hunt him down, for we cannot thus be driven away from our home by the villain."

"And when shall we go, Rafael?" asked Victorine, delighted at the thought of going beyond danger of a visit from Belmont, the Buccaneer.

"We can get off within ten days, I think, and the yacht and lugger will carry all that we wish to take with us."

"Suppose you go by *volante* to the city, to look up a home for us."

"No, I will not leave you, Rafael."

"Then I will send to our agent there to secure us a place at once," was the reply, and orders were at once given to the servants to begin to pack up to go to the city.

Within ten days all was in readiness, and the plantation lugger was loaded with troops which were to be taken to the new home, and the mansion was shut up and left to the care of Cespedes.

The house servants went on board the lugger, and the Cuban, his wife, child and half a dozen others boarded the yacht, a pretty craft of ten tons burden, used as a means of transport to and from the city.

It was sunset when the two vessels sailed, and in spite of her lubberly appearance the lugger held her own with the pleasure craft, for she was a swift sailer.

A thorough sailor himself, Rafael Rodriguez took command and headed well out to sea, the lugger close in his wake.

The wind, at first fresh soon died out, and when but four leagues on their way the two vessels were becalmed and lay rocking lazily upon the sea.

Toward midnight the moon arose, and with its coming a wind sprang up.

But with the wind coming over the waters was a large schooner under a press of canvas.

Rafael Rodriguez did not like the rakish look of the craft, and his glass soon showed her to be armed.

Along she came, right down before the wind, while the lugger and yacht had not yet felt its influence.

The young Cuban grew anxious, for he knew that resistance was useless, should the stranger prove to be a foe, and to escape from so fleet a craft was impossible he was well aware.

At last the wind filled the sails of the two little vessels, and they bent to its influence and began to bowl merrily along.

But the schooner changed her course, caught the breeze abeam and came in hot chase.

The moon revealed her to be a very rakish looking craft, and she certainly sailed with twice the speed of the two smaller vessels.

To reach the shore was impossible, for there was no harborage there, even could the yacht and lugger get there ahead of the schooner.

Quickly she came on, gaining steadily, but though within range not firing to bring the vessels to.

This circumstance caused Rafael Rodriguez to dread her the more, for, had she been an honest cruiser she would at once have fired to bring the two little vessels to.

Nearer and nearer she came, until at last the Cuban felt that the schooner would overhaul them within half an hour at the furthest.

His wife was below, unmindful of danger; but he determined to awake her and prepare her for what might come; so he went into the cabin and said:

"Victorine, dress yourself and come on deck, for there is a vessel in chase."

He spoke calmly, but her heart sunk within her and within ten minutes she stood by her husband's side.

He pointed to the schooner and handed her the glass, while he said:

"I hope it is a Spanish cruiser."

One long look through the glass and Victorine let it fall to the deck, while she said in a voice that was hoarse with emotion:

"Rafael, that is the schooner of Belmont the Buccaneer; so we are lost!"

Her worst dread was realized, for the schooner was the pirate craft of the man who had given her so much reason to believe that he would keep the threats he had made.

CHAPTER XIV.

IN A PIRATE'S POWER.

STEADILY and swiftly the pirate schooner came on, and standing upon the deck, clinging to her husband's arm, was Victorine, her eyes riveted upon the vessel which held so much of dread to her.

She had called Liza the negress upon deck, and the two had said that the schooner was the craft of Belmont the Buccaneer.

Liza held, clasped in her arms, the little child, Norma, and, as the Cuban planter gazed upon his beautiful wife and tiny daughter his heart almost sunk in despair.

Nearer and nearer drew the schooner, and, as though realizing that the big game was in the yacht, he ran close to windward of the lugger, allowed his sharp bows to almost touch her quarter, and a score of visible forms sprang upon her decks.

And by her swept the schooner, having blanketed the lugger for a moment and leaving her dancing in her wake as she held on after the yacht.

As she drew nearer to the yacht, Rafael Rodriguez hailed:

"Ho, the schooner, ahoy!"

"Ay, ay, senor!" was the response.

"What schooner is that, and why do you give chase?"

"It is for me to ask questions, senor, you to answer."

"Lay to, or I'll run you down," was the stern response.

There was no help for it, and Rafael brought the yacht to, the lugger following the example of the pleasure-boat.

Luffing sharp, the schooner glided slowly ahead until she was up to the stern of the yacht, and in an instant an officer and a score of men with cutlasses and pistols in hand, leaped upon the decks of the little vessel.

"It is Belmont!" said Victorine, in a voice that quivered with the emotion which almost overpowered her.

It was Frank Belmont, looking very handsome in his uniform, and with a smile upon his handsome face—a face more godlike than satanic in its expression.

As he approached the spot where the Cuban, his wife and Liza stood, with the crew of the yacht and the other servants huddled in terror behind them, Rafael Rodriguez released himself from the grasp of Victorine, and with uplifted sword stepped forward, for he had armed himself thoroughly.

Instantly Belmont started back.

He had not heard that Rafael Rodriguez was not dead, and was for a moment unnerved at seeing him.

"*Caramba!* Are you man or ghost?" said the buccaneer, gruffly.

"I am a man, Senor Buccaneer, and if you are also one and not a coward, you will allow me to settle with my sword between us who is victor here," responded the brave Cuban.

The buccaneer stood on his guard, while a strange expression crossed his face.

He had believed that the Cuban was dead, and he was on his way to the Buena Vista Plantation to demand that Victorine should now become his wife.

He had seen the yacht and lugger, and supposing it to be some rich planter moving to the city, gave chase, expecting a rich haul.

Now he saw that the game he sought was in his clutches.

He feared to push matters, for he knew the spirit of Rafael Rodriguez and also of Victorine, and did not doubt but that they would take their own lives before his face, if it came to the worst; so he determined to temporize, and raising his hat he said:

"I greet you, Senora Rodriguez. This is an unexpected honor, I assure you."

"And what is your intention, Senor Belmont, regarding my husband and myself?" asked Victorine with forced calmness.

"I am a pirate, as you now know, lady, and my prizes belong to my crew, so I cannot afford to set you free as I would wish, but must hold you for ransom."

"And will you ransom us?" eagerly asked Rafael Rodriguez.

"Yes, senor, but my price will be a large one, for you have, besides your wife and yourself, a lovely child, I see, with fully a score of slaves on

the two vessels, and certainly a very valuable cargo."

"I will pay any sum within reason, Senor Pirate."

"Well, we will discuss that later; but just now this is not a safe locality for my vessel, and I will have to ask you and your wife to become my guests upon my schooner."

"And do you pledge your word to ransom us, senor?"

"I have my price, senor, and it is within reason, so if it is agreed to all will be well," was the reply.

It was like a drowning man catching at a straw; but it was a ray of hope and they could do nothing but submit, so the Cuban, Victorine, Liza and little Norma were taken on board the schooner, which at once stood seaward while the yacht and lugger followed in her wake, a prize crew in charge of them.

Hardly had they entered the cabin of the schooner, when Rafael Rodriguez was forced to give up his arms and a moment after he was put in irons and sent below decks into the hold.

In vain was it that Victorine pleaded, for the buccaneer was deaf to her pleading.

The next day, as she sat moaning in her cabin the lugger and yacht were brought alongside and a transfer of the cargo begun.

This being done the negroes, excepting Liza, were put on board the lugger and dispatched under Carlos Conrad to one of the West India Islands to be sold, the sum to be turned into the schooner's fund.

"I hope, Senor Captain, you mean no harm to that lovely lady and her gallant husband," said Carlos Conrad before he set sail in the lugger.

"No more than that I must have my price, Conrad, for their ransom."

"I am glad to hear you say this, for I could not bear harm befalling them."

"But where am I to rejoin you, senor?"

"Off the Great Abaco, in the Bahamas, two weeks from to-day."

"Yes senor, and let me again beg you to be merciful."

Belmont bit his lips as though vexed.

He was not one too brook interference from any one excepting Carlos Conrad and he seemed to feel that he was going too far.

But he merely waved his hand in parting and the two vessels moved apart.

The yacht was scuttled and soon after went down, while the schooner held on her way toward the Florida coast, at a point near what is now St. Andrew's Bay, where was the rendezvous the buccaneer.

As the fleet vessel sped along over the sea Frank Belmont descended into the cabin and bade Liza tell her mistress that he wished to speak with her.

Victorine was in one of the state-rooms, and in obedience came forth with pallid, haggard face, and asked:

"Well senor, what have you to say to me?"

"I have come to offer my terms, senora, which you remember I told you I would demand," was the cold reply, and as she gazed into the face of the buccaneer the heart of the young wife sunk within her, for she felt that she could not see one atom of mercy there for her and those she loved.

CHAPTER XV.

THE BUCCANEER'S TERMS.

ORDERING Liza to go on deck, the negress dared not disobey, and with little Norma clasped close in her arms, started to go, when Victorine cried:

"Give me my child, Liza."

The negress obeyed, and the young mother clasped the little one to her aching heart.

"Now, senor, I am ready to hear what you have to say," she said.

"My dear senora, I would not have you look upon me as a foe, as you appear to do, but as a friend."

"There is mockery in such friendship."

"No. I saved your life, and—"

"Would to Heaven I had died then."

"Do not say so."

"I mean it."

"I met you then, and it was to love you, for no other woman but you ever touched my heart, and I have met beautiful women in my day, senora."

"I deem it is a curse upon me to win such love," was the cutting reply.

"Do not be bitter, for I like it not, but hear me."

"I am all attention, senor."

"I told you of my love, and yet you wedded another almost before I was out of sight."

"I wedded one I loved, senor, and whom I had no opportunity to tell you I was then engaged to."

"Well, I am unforgiving, and, where I built up hope of making you my wife, and having you lead me into a life of honor, I became revengeful when I found that you had deceived me."

"It was not deception, senor."

"Call it what you will, but you wedded another."

"That other is now on my vessel, and his child is in your arms."

"You have asked me for my terms, and I shall now tell you what they are."

"I am listening, senor."

"I will spare your child to you if you will pledge yourself to become my wife one year from to-day."

"Senor! you forget that I have a husband," and the face of Victorine flushed with anger.

"Now you have, but he must die, senora."

"Die!" and the woman spoke in a tone of horror.

"Certainly, for no man's life shall stand between me and you."

"Holy Mother save him!" groaned Victorine.

"Senora, your husband must die, and you and your child shall go to an island retreat I know of, taking Liza with you, and I pledge myself that you will be well cared for there, while I will keep away until your year of mourning is at an end."

"Then you must become my wife, and should you refuse, then your child's life shall be the forfeit."

"I love you, and with you for my wife, I will become a different man, and happiness will come to us both."

"Happiness come to me as the wife of the one who murdered my husband, and forced me to marry him to save my child?"

"Oh, man! if you have one spark of humanity in your soul, let me go from here with my husband—my child."

"I am rich—very rich, and my husband has wealth independent of mine; but every peso of it will we give you to let us free."

"Be human, man, if man you be, and let us go, and I will pray for mercy to my dying day for your guilty soul."

Frank Belmont's face did not change an expression at the pleading of the young wife.

He was not one to feel pity, and not one to be merciful to man, so a woman's prayers and tears could not move his obdurate soul.

"You have heard my terms, senora, and it is whether you lose both husband and child, or lose one and save the other."

"I would rather that you would put the three of us to death, senor."

"No, I will not do that, but I will see that your husband dies, and that you have the year's respite that I offer."

"Now I shall leave you, and give orders to sail to the island retreat I spoke of."

"And my noble husband?"

"Must die!"

"Heaven spare him!"

"Appeals are useless to Heaven, as well as to me, senora."

"I cannot believe that you will be so vile a monster," and the hope seemed to pervade the heart of the wretched woman.

"You know now that I sought to kill him once, but I was merciful enough to act so that you should not know he fell by my hand."

"You discovered that it was I who ran him through in the duel we fought, so it should convince you that I am one to keep my word."

"Alas! I fear that you are!"

"You will see that I am, senora, and my only excuse is in loving you, for love you I do with all my heart and soul."

"Leave me, sir!"

He turned and left the cabin, while with a moan of anguish Victorine sunk upon the floor in a swoon, still grasping her child in her arms.

"Go to your mistress, for she needs you!" said Belmont, addressing the negress as he went on deck, and Liza, with a cry of alarm, darted down into the cabin just as the lookout aloft sung out:

"Sail ho!"

CHAPTER XVI.

THE CRUISER AND THE PIRATE.

In the years between the war of the Revolution and 1812 and as late as 1820 there was much outlawry upon the seas, for privateers, both English and American, had been fitted out to scour the ocean in quest of merchant craft from 1774 to 1787, and these did not always act strictly to the letter of the law laid down for Letters of Marque as they were called.

Then in the years of this century again there were European nations at war, Spain, France and England, and also several of the South American countries in a state of ferment, and the result was that the privateers in some cases turned pirates, and the vessels-of-war of the different countries were too busy fighting foes worthy of their steel to devote time to hunting down buccaneers.

As a matter of course this left the seas to the mercy almost of outlaw craft, and there were quite a number of vessels flying the American, English, French, Spanish and other flags, known as "privateers" who were guilty of acts that were nothing more than piracies.

Upon the day when Captain Belmont had the scene with poor Victorine in the cabin of his vessel, and made known to her his alternative as to the fate she was to expect, a sail was sighted just as he came upon deck.

Ever on the alert for a prize that might enrich his treasure locker, or a foe to avoid, Cap-

tain Belmont called out to the man aloft and asked:

"What do you make her out, sir?"

"There is a fog-bank that hides her just now, sir—she is just there in that mist, and I think is a schooner."

"Doubtless an American cruiser, so we must be careful," replied Belmont, addressing one of his officers.

"It certainly is best, sir, for some of these American cruisers are very fast, and fight like bulldogs," was the reply of the officer.

The vessel soon after came into view, and was seen to be an armed schooner under easy sail, and standing toward the buccaneer craft.

The outlaw had evidently already been discovered, for more sail was being rapidly set on the stranger, and her men were at quarters.

At her peak floated the United States flag.

As an American, Belmont was never anxious to fire upon a war vessel of his native land, or to capture a merchant craft flying the Stars and Stripes, and so he at once gave orders to stand away in flight.

All sail was crowded on as soon as the course of the schooner was changed, and then it was seen to the regret of the buccaneers that the stranger was gaining.

The cruiser was certainly a very beautiful vessel.

Her deck was in perfect condition, every rope was in place, and her crew were a bold-looking set of tars, while her guns looked to be thoroughly for use.

She was a trifle larger than the buccaneer, but then her battery seemed not as heavy, and the crew perhaps numbered a few more than did Belmont's.

Upon the quarter-deck of the cruiser stood her commander, and near him several officers, the latter having a foreign look, while many of the crew also appeared to be Spaniards.

The commander was a man of thirty-eight, with a bold face, by no means handsome, and yet with an attractive smile.

His eye was dark and restless, and his manner seemed like one who had confidence in himself.

"That craft is a pirate, I can swear, before he shows his colors, so will be worth capturing, Hernandez," he said, to one of his officers.

"Yes, Senor Captain, she is, if I mistake not, the schooner of Belmont the Buccaneer," replied Hernandez in English, but with a slight accent.

"Ah!" and the captain turned his glass upon the chase, as though the name of Belmont held deep interest for him.

"I am sure, Senor Captain, that is Belmont's schooner, and if so she will be a rich prize," said the lieutenant.

"She certainly will be, especially as Belmont has a lieutenant, I have heard, who once sailed with me."

"His name is Carlos Conrad."

"I have heard of him, Captain Sprague, and a daring fellow he is; but will you open fire now, senor, for we are in range?"

"Yes, we will see if he has a stern gun that will reach us," and a moment after a bow pivot gun on the cruiser opened fire.

The shot cut through the sails of the fugitive schooner and buried itself in the sea beyond.

A moment after a stern pivot gun on the flying outlaw craft returned the shot.

But the shot fell short.

"We have him, Hernandez, for we can keep out of range and cut him to pieces," said Captain Sprague, with a quiet smile.

"When he sees your intention, senor, he will put back and fight you at close quarters, for he is a desperate fellow."

"True, but we must capture the schooner, Hernandez, so keep that gun going, but do not aim to cut away her sticks."

"Fire at her decks, where the shots will tell on the crew."

Senor Hernandez went forward to give the orders to the gunners, and soon after it was seen that the fire of the cruiser was doing much damage, while the shot from the buccaneer fell short.

"There! he is going to strike back," said Hernandez as the buccaneer wore around, having seen that it was useless to fly, as the pursuer was steadily gaining, and his shots were wounding the hull severely and strewing the deck with dead and maimed men.

"We must fight him at close quarters, and more, we must take that schooner, for she is certainly a better craft than the one we have," said Belmont, and he gave the order to put back and meet the pursuer in a conflict at close quarters.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE SEA DEVIL.

BELMONT the Buccaneer realized that he had to meet a dangerous foe.

He had always considered his vessel about the fastest craft afloat, and yet his pursuer crept steadily up on him.

He had a long-range stern-pivot gun, to protect himself in flight from a stronger foe, and he saw that the cruiser possessed one of heavier caliber and longer range.

Ere a score of shots had been fired it resolved itself into a one-sided affair, for the cruiser's fire was strewing the decks with the dead, and cutting great gaps in his hull, while his shots fell short.

He had gone below and urged Victorine to go with her child and Liza into the hold, out of danger; but the young wife refused, saying that she would remain in the cabin, and she stood by the stern port, with little Norma in her arms watching the fire of the cruiser and seemingly courting death.

Thus the running fire continued until Belmont the buccaneer saw that he must turn and strike back, before his crew was decimated and his vessel badly crippled.

Calling his men to the guns, the schooner was at once put about and stood on a course to meet the cruiser.

The latter now opened heavily with her broadside guns; but the buccaneer's side batteries were heavier than those of the cruiser, and the duel became at once upon an equal footing.

But, for some reason the fire of the cruiser's men was more perfect and the buccaneer craft still suffered the most.

Nearer and nearer the two schooners drew to each other, giving and taking cruel blows, and at last, as he saw that the buccaneer was weakening in his fire, Captain Sprague gave the order to prepare to board.

"Do you see that storm, Senor Captain?"

It was Hernandez who spoke, and he pointed to the westward, where a mass of black clouds were rolling into the skies and threatening to break in a furious storm.

The sun had set, and darkness was coming on, so that if the pirate was to be taken it must be at once, Captain Sprague quickly saw.

The pirates did not seem to have noticed the coming storm, but were manning their guns with desperation.

"Give one broadside, with guns doubly charged, and then the other, and we will run him aboard!" cried Captain Sprague.

This order was obeyed promptly, and the effect was disastrous in the extreme to the buccaneer, for the mainmast was cut down, and in falling carried with it the foremast, which was snapped off some ten feet from the top.

The wreckage went over the side, and a lurch of the disabled schooner dragged off the bowsprit and the buccaneer craft was a wreck upon the sea.

Another broadside was mercilessly poured upon the doomed pirate, and then the cruiser dashed up under its lee and glided alongside slowly.

A heavy bump, and grapnels were thrown, and then the cruiser's crew boarded, headed by their commander.

Belmont was not yet conquered however, though his vessel was a wreck, his decks strewn with dead and dying and himself wounded.

"Ho, lads, let them take the wreck, and we will have their schooner!"

"Follow me!"

Loud rung his command, and with a few men he gained the deck of the cruiser.

He had evidently prepared for this, for in the arms of a stalwart seaman was the fair form of Victorine, who had fainted, and another held her child, while two others were dragging Liza along between them, a couple more held a strong box, and these, protected by a score of the buccaneer crew, reached the deck of the cruiser, a moment after Captain Sprague and his tars sprung upon the wrecked outlaw craft.

But just then there arose the cry:

"The schooner is going down!"

A wild rush was made for the cruiser, and in the desperate struggle Captain Sprague was wounded and fell to the deck.

He was at once seized by his men and borne back to his own vessel, which was quickly cast adrift from the buccaneer, and a desperate battle was begun between Belmont and his maddened crew for the mastery of the cruiser.

But they were a mere handful, and were driven forward, shot down, or hurled into the sea, and Belmont the buccaneer was made captive with a few others of his men.

In the mean time the cruiser was stripped to meet the storm, while the wreck was driving along, the score of pirates on board shrieking loudly to be taken off of the sinking craft, for to save themselves from going down in the sea they were willing to risk being hanged.

The storm broke with terrible fury, and the cruiser had a hard struggle with the fierce winds and wild waters, and Senor Hernandez had his hands full to save the vessel, for Captain Sprague had been carried into the cabin severely wounded in the leg, and the surgeon of the cruiser was examining the wound with an expression upon his face that showed that he deemed it most serious.

And in one corner of the cabin crouched poor Victorine, little Norma clasped to her breast, and lying full length upon the floor was Liza, who had been wounded in coming on board the cruiser, and had died at the feet of her mistress after an officer had taken her to the cabin.

"Well, Solarez, what of my wound?" coolly asked Captain Sprague, of his Spanish lieutenant.

"Your leg must come off, Senor Captain, for the bone is shattered to atoms below the knee," was the reply.

"All right, do your work quickly, for there are others to look to," came the brave response from the cruiser's commander.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE WIDOW.

UNMINDFUL of the presence of the crouching woman and her child, Solarez, the surgeon, began his work, and with a cigar clinched between his teeth the brave captain stood the dread ordeal without a groan.

Skillfully the amputation was made, and the wound dressed, and then came the words, spoken in a soft tone:

"Leave him to my care, senor, for there are other sufferers on deck for you to look after. "Do you not hear their groans?"

It was Victorine who spoke, and she stood by the side of Surgeon Solarez.

He bowed politely, saw that little Norma was lying motionless upon the floor, her head resting upon the heart of the dead negress, and he asked:

"But you, senora, do you not need my aid, or your child, or servant?"

"No, senor, my poor servant is dead, and little Norma sleeps."

"Go, I beg you, to those who need you, and I will care for this noble, brave man!"

The surgeon bowed and left the cabin, and turning Victorine beheld the eyes of the captain fixed upon her.

"Who are you?" he asked.

"I am Senora Rodriguez, a Cuban, and, with my husband, child and nurse we were the captives of Belmont the buccaneer."

"You saved me from a fearful fate, senor, by your gallant victory; but alas! my husband has gone to the bottom in the pirate schooner, for he was heavily ironed and kept down in the hold."

She spoke calmly, as though she had made up her mind that life's darkest side was turned to her and no more cruel blows could be given.

"This is fearful! the wreck may not have sunk, so I will give orders to keep before the storm as it would drive, and in the morning search for it."

"Ah, senor, it is a ray of hope, and you are good to think of me in your great suffering."

"Call to the deck for me, please, and I will give the order."

Hernandez himself appeared and he greeted his captain with deepest sympathy, and, in response to the order given him said that he would station lookouts about the vessel and endeavor to keep as near on the track of the wreck as possible.

Then Captain Sprague told him to send the steward to him, to prepare a state-room for their fair guest and her child, and worn out with suffering the gallant commander of the cruiser sunk to sleep.

Having seen the body of poor Liza borne out of the cabin, to find a grave in the sea, and placed little Norma in a comfortable berth in the state-room assigned to her, Victorine returned to the side of the wounded captain.

He was sleeping, though suffering, as she could tell by the set lips, and she sat down to keep her weary vigil as self-constituted nurse.

Before her loomed up the misery and torture she had known the past few days, and the hope faded out of her heart that she would ever see her husband again.

She knew that the fire of the cruiser had riddled the hull of the schooner, cut away her masts and otherwise wrecked her, and she feared it had been sent to the bottom when the storm struck it.

But the captain, in spite of his own sufferings, had thought of her, and ordered that the schooner follow on the track that the wreck must drive, and thus there was hope for her yet seeing her husband though the chances were strongly against such a joyous termination of her sorrows.

Still Victorine was no ordinary woman, and she nerved herself to bear all that would come upon her for the sake of her child.

The morning dawned brightly and found the watcher still at her post as self-imposed nurse.

The captain had slept through the night, but his moans showed that he had suffered intensely. Opening his eyes he slightly started as he beheld the sad, beautiful face near him.

"I half-believed that I was dead, and opening my eyes beheld an angel."

"I recall you now, lady, for you are the one taken from the pirate craft," he said.

She was touched by his kind voice, and she told him, in a few fervent words, her sad story.

"And has no one reported from the deck, thus far?"

"No, Senor Captain."

"Will you kindly call my lieutenant, and I will ask if the wreck is in sight?"

She did so, and Hernandez appeared.

"Not a sail, or anything in the shape of a vessel in sight, senor," he said.

The tears filled the beautiful eyes of Victorine at the words, and she leant out of the open port to hide her emotion.

"Order my steward to prepare breakfast for

this lady, Hernandez, and then go and set a double watch and do all in your power to find the wreck, for I will not give up the search for a couple of days."

"Yes, Senor Captain."

"Send the surgeon to me also, and, if light is discovered report at once."

But the two days passed away and not a vestige of the wreck was found, so all decided that it went down in the storm, and Victorine lost all hope and regarded her husband as dead.

Captain Sprague then decided to take his fair guest to her plantation home on the coast, for she said that she should return there, as there was no longer any danger of Belmont, the buccaneer, and she told the cruiser's commander that it would be well for him to become her guest until he got well, as there he could have large quarters and every attention, while he could repair his vessel while in the little harborage.

This course the surgeon also urged and the schooner was headed for Buena Vista Plantation and the rescuer of Victorine became her guest, and it did not take Senor Hernandez long to see that his captain was desperately in love with the beautiful young widow, and in fact so was the Senor Hernandez, and it aroused an ugly spirit in him to feel that his commander might win her, for he saw that Victorine was very kind and gentle in her manner toward the one to whom she owed so much, while she treated him with cold politeness.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE RIVALS.

It certainly was a great surprise, and a sad one, to the good overseer of the Buena Vista Plantation to see Victorine return and to hear her sad story.

She told of the capture of the yacht and the lugger, the carrying off to some retreat of the booty and the slaves, which were to be sold, and then of her own captivity upon the pirate craft, while her husband was in double irons.

"His death was certain, and had not the cruiser rescued us I know my fate would have been worse than death," she added.

All that could be done for the comfort of the guest was done.

The house was put in perfect condition once more and other servants were called upon to take charge.

The captain was given a charming room, and from the numerous windows he had a fine view of the sea, the little harbor and the coast scenery.

A negro man, a fine nurse had been specially told to care for him, and Victorine kept his room filled with flowers, while prints in abundance were in reach of his hand.

Hiding her own grief she was wont to sing for him, accompanying herself upon the guitar, and then she would read aloud by the hour to him until the sailor seemed to feel that he was actually in Paradise.

Little Norma was brought often to see him, and seemed to have taken a great fancy to the wounded man.

The schooner lay in the harborage undergoing needed repairs, and she was under the eye of her captain, while twice a day did Senor Hernandez come up to the mansion to make his report that all was well, and also to inquire after the health of his captain.

At such times Senor Hernandez never failed to see the beautiful mistress of Buena Vista, and he tried to make himself most agreeable to her.

"I see how it is going," he said to himself one day.

"The captain is not handsome, but he is plucky, and that catches a woman."

Then he consoles her for her husband's loss, threatens to hang Belmont as soon as he gets on board his vessel once more, and is just making things come out to suit himself.

"If I don't stop it there will be a wedding in this house, and the Senora Rodriguez will become Mrs. Sprague."

"But I'll stop it, for I'm tired of the sea, and I've a notion to marry the sweet widow myself and settle down to a life of luxury."

"Yes, I'll stop the matter, and I know just how to do it."

There was an evil look in the eyes of Senor Hernandez as the words came from his lips, and he appeared to be a man to keep his threat.

One day, some two months after the arrival of the schooner in Buena Vista Harbor, Hernandez came up to the mansion.

Captain Sprague was steadily improving, but yet too weak to get around, even on crutches, for he had lost a good deal of blood when wounded, and it was slow work recuperating, though his wound was healing well.

The lieutenant entered the captain's room and took his seat, as was his wont, by the window.

"Captain, have you forgotten that Belmont is on board in irons?" he asked.

"By no means."

"Why do you ask?"

"Well, sir, he seems to be suffering, and the best thing to do is to let me hang him and have it over with."

"No, I will take him to the United States and hang him."

"He is an American, and I prefer to string him up in the port where I live; but you can give him quarters in my cabin, and treat him as though he were a guest, for I wish him to live."

"Yes, sir," and Lieutenant Hernandez was quiet for a moment.

Then he asked:

"Do you think it will be long before you get out, senor?"

"It may be a couple of months."

"There is certainly no hurry, so I will not hasten and perhaps throw myself into a relapse."

"The men are grumbling, senor."

"Let them grumble, for it is the Spanish element only that do so, I am sure."

"May I ask another question, senor?"

"Yes."

"To explain it, senor, let me tell you frankly that I have fallen desperately in love with this beautiful widow, and I do not care to become my captain's rival, so I would ask if it is your intention to offer yourself to her?"

"I, like yourself, senor, love the Senora Rodriguez, and, in fact, do not see how it can be that one who knows her could help loving her."

"And you intend to offer yourself, captain?"

"When a sufficient time has gone by, after the death of her husband, I do."

"Have you any reason to believe that she will accept you, senor?"

"Your questions smack of impudence, senor," said Captain Sprague, tartly.

"I mean only to know the truth, captain," was the cool reply.

"I decline to say."

"Then permit me to give you a piece of advice."

Captain Sprague's face flushed with anger.

His lieutenant saw that he was arousing him to resentment, but seemed not to care that it was so.

With calmness of manner and voice, however, the captain asked:

"Well, Senor Hernandez, what is your advice?"

"Senor Captain, as I told you, I love the Senora Rodriguez, and thus loving her I would not see her deceived."

"I would not see a great wrong done her by your making her your wife."

"You dare me, Hernandez, because I am helpless now," said Captain Sprague, with suppressed emotion.

"I do not dare you, senor, and I only act for the good of the woman I have learned to love with an idolatrous passion."

"What you are she does not know; but if you ask her to become your wife, if you seek to marry her, I shall betray your secret and thus save her."

Captain Sprague's pale face was livid now, and his eyes fairly blazed as they were bent upon his lieutenant.

For a moment he could not speak, but at last he gained self-control and said:

"Hernandez, I have always treated you well, as you can not deny, and for you now to turn against me I do not understand."

"A woman has come between us, senor," was the reply.

"Ah! your reason is plain, you seek to gain what you fear I may win."

"No, senor, I seek only to protect her whom I love."

"And you would keep your threat to prevent my marrying the senora?"

"I would, senor."

"It is base of you, Hernandez."

"Not so base an act to save the senora, as would be yours to make her your wife."

"You hold the power to do as you say, Hernandez, so I yield."

"You will not marry her?"

"No."

"Then I will keep your secret."

"Yes, for I would not wish her respect of me lessened."

"Now go on board the schooner, and as soon as I am able to move with crutches, I will sail from here."

Hernandez turned and left the room, while upon his lips were the muttered words:

"No, Senor Captain, you will never have her."

CHAPTER XX.

A DEADLY POTION.

SEVERAL days passed away, after the scene between the rival officers in the Buena Vista mansion, and Captain Sprague seemed to improve more rapidly than before.

One morning Senor Hernandez paid his accustomed visit, and seemed glad to find his captain so much better.

"The doctor has left me a new medicine, which he says will rapidly strengthen me, Hernandez, and within a week I shall sail," said Captain Sprague.

"I am something of a chemist myself, so I wonder what he has left you," said Hernandez,

and he took up the bottle of medicine and went to the window with it.

There he appeared to examine it carefully, tasted it, and placing the bottle back on the table, remarked:

"It is beyond my knowledge of medicines to discover what the drug is."

"Well, I have only taken it once, but it seemed to help me."

"It doubtless will, senor, but you think of sailing soon?"

"Within ten days."

"And will go to the States?"

"Yes, I shall first go to a northern port and hang Belmont the Buccaneer."

"How does he seem?"

"He accepts his situation calmly, but his wound gives him pain, I am sure, though he does not complain."

"Well, have the schooner in full readiness to sail at any time," was the reply, and a silence fell between them for several minutes.

"Have you seen the Senora Rodriguez of late, Hernandez?" asked Captain Sprague, after awhile breaking the silence.

"I meet her now and then, senor."

"You have not said aught to her, I trust, to carry out your threat?"

"My threat, senor, was to be carried out only if you meant to marry her."

The commander made no reply, and soon after his lieutenant departed.

The following day Senor Hernandez called earlier than usual, and he asked the servant who met him at the mansion door:

"How is the captain this morning?"

"He seems not so well, senor, and is preparing to depart."

"I was just going abroad the vessel to give you this note."

The lieutenant grasped the note eagerly and read:

"SENOR:—I have determined to sail to-day, so have a boat's crew come ashore for me with a litter at noon. SPRAGUE."

Up to the room of his captain went the lieutenant, and his face wore an anxious look as he entered.

"I have just received your note, senor; but this is sudden."

"Yes, Hernandez, and yet I feel that by going I save my life."

"Indeed, senor?"

"The truth is, I believe the plantation overseer is in love with the senora, and thinks me in the way."

"He came last night and stayed quite awhile, and after he left, I took a dose of that medicine, and it did not taste the same and affected me strangely."

"I do not wish to charge him with putting poison into it, but he certainly tampered with it, and I have decided to go."

"Get your doctor to give you another bottle, to carry along, and destroy the other, senor."

"I will, for I think it benefitted me before it was tampered with."

"But have the men come for me at noon."

The parting between the senora and her guest was a kindly one, and Captain Sprague said:

"I know not how to thank you for all your kindness to me, senora; but you may rest assured that Belmont the Buccaneer shall no longer disturb you, as I shall hang him upon reaching an American port."

"Ah, senor, you have more than repaid the little I have done for you, and I hope that should you again cruise in these waters you will not pass Buena Vista by."

"No, indeed, senora, for I shall drop anchor here to tell you that Belmont has met his just punishment."

Thus Captain Sprague and the Senora Rodriguez parted, and borne on board his vessel by half a dozen of his crew, the schooner soon after stood out to sea.

For some reason Lieutenant Hernandez seemed out of sorts, and after several days he became really ill, and appeared to be greatly alarmed about himself, while Captain Sprague steadily improved.

Belmont the Buccaneer, white-faced, silent and suffering from his wound, had been removed to quarters in the ward-room, and Captain Sprague had his sick lieutenant brought into his cabin.

One night, when the schooner was dashing along under storm-sails over a seething sea, and the wind was howling fiercely, Hernandez started up in his cot and said:

"My God! what ails me?"

"I feel as if my breath was leaving me."

Captain Sprague was lying upon a lounge, reading by the light from the cabin lamp.

He felt no anxiety for his vessel, as his second officer was in charge, and he knew him to be a skilled seaman.

"Perhaps a drink of brandy will relieve you, Hernandez—take this."

The captain raised to a sitting posture, poured out a glass of brandy from a decanter, and the lieutenant eagerly dashed it off at a draught.

A moment after he gave a loud cry of pain, but it was unheard on deck, and only heard by the man in the cabin with him.

"Great God! I believe I am dying!" and he tried to get off of his cot.

But the effort was too great for him, and he fell back exhausted, while he breathed uneasily.

Then Captain Sprague moved toward him and took a seat near, while he said in a low voice:

"Hernandez, you are dying."

"No! no! I must not die, for my work on earth is not done yet—no! no! I will not die!"

"You have not the control of life and death, Hernandez!"

"But what ails me?" and the man's voice grew fainter, his breathing harder.

"I will tell you."

"Do you know?"

"Yes."

"For God's sake call the surgeon!"

"He can do you no good."

"Would you see me die without the effort at least on his part to save me?"

"He can do you no good, Hernandez, for you have simply taken your own poison."

"Taken my own poison?" almost shouted the man.

"Yes."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that I gave you the medicine, poisoned by you, which you meant that I should take."

The man seemed to be wild with frenzy at these words, and yet he could not move, for upon him was the poison doing its deadly work.

"I saw you, Hernandez, take the medicine from the table, which the doctor left for me to take."

"I saw you, by the aid of a mirror, put a powder into it, when you walked over to the window that day at Buena Vista Plantation."

"I did not touch it, for I knew that you meant to kill me."

"I have given it to you to build you up, and you see its effects were deadly, as you meant they should be."

"Knowing the poison, you are aware that you will be a dead man within a few minutes!"

Captain Sprague had spoken calmly, and yet with suppressed emotion.

The dying man glared at him, but he could neither cry out or move.

At last he said:

"You have avenged yourself, senor, and you get rid of a man who could betray you, and more, you will make Senora Rodriguez your wife."

"You have triumphed, Senor Captain!"

The last words were uttered in a whisper almost, and a moment after a convulsive chill ran through the form and Hernandez was dead.

Then Captain Sprague made his way up the companionway as best he could into the schooner, pitching as she was, and called out:

"Send the surgeon here! I believe Senor Hernandez is dying!"

The surgeon came; but Senor Hernandez was dead, and the man of medicine and surgery diagnosed the case as an attack of heart disease.

CHAPTER XXI.

AT THE YARD-ARM.

IN a seaport town on the Massachusetts coast, there still stand two old homesteads which were once the admiration of the citizens of the little place.

They were nearly a mile apart, and situated back upon a ridge which overlooked the town and commanded an extensive view of the harbor and ocean.

One of these homesteads, the nearest to the village, and situated back from the main highway, a stage-road running down into the town, was known as Beacon Hill.

It had been the home of the Sprague family for generations, but was, at the time of which I write, the property of the only living representative of his name in that part of the country.

The family were a seafaring people, and the elder Sprague had amassed a snug fortune and owned a fine clipper ship, of which his son became master when he reached the age of twenty-one.

With the death of his father, the war broke out between England and the Colonies and the young sailor gave up his ship and turned privateersman, and he won considerable fame as a daring commander.

So it was that, with the master away, Beacon Hill was closed and left to the care of a couple of old and faithful servants.

The other home spoken of was of even grander pretensions than was Beacon Hill, and it was known as Overlook Manor, its master also being a sailor, but one who had settled down to a life at home, having married and given up the sea.

The name of the master of Overlook Manor was Brent, and he was a stern, reserved man, whom the townspeople seemed to stand in awe of.

Upon a pleasant afternoon, some weeks after the death of Senor Hernandez at sea, in the cabin of the armed schooner, a vessel was heading in toward the little port of G—

She was under easy sail, schooner rig, but carried a large squaresail yard, up to the port end of which, as she glided toward the harbor, the horrified citizens beheld the form of a human being hoisted, while a gun was fired and the Stars and Stripes were run up with the black flag of a pirate beneath them.

Instantly the shores were lined with an excited crowd, gazing at the incoming vessel, and all knew that the swinging form and black flag beneath the Stars and Stripes told of a pirate captured and hanged.

Upon the deck of the schooner, as she drew near the harbor, had been standing several officers, while the crew were gathered forward.

One of these officers, on crutches, and with one leg, the reader will recognize as Captain Sprague, the captor of Belmont the Buccaneer.

When a little more than a league from the port, he had said:

"Senor Morte, bring the pirate prisoner on deck and rig a rope for his execution."

"Ay, ay, senor; but will you hang him at sea?"

"I have so decided."

"I shall sail into the harbor with him hanging at the yard-arm."

The officer addressed at once gave the necessary orders, and in a moment after Belmont the Buccaneer was brought upon deck.

His long confinement below, and the anticipation of his fate, had told upon him, for he was pale and haggard.

But his eyes shone brightly, and the indomitable pluck of the man caused him not to quail when a glance about him showed the situation as it was.

"Belmont the Buccaneer, I sent you word a week ago, that your days were numbered."

"We are now approaching an American port, and I would tell you that you shall die at the yard-arm within ten minutes, in punishment for your crimes."

"Have you any communication to make, for this is your only chance?" and Captain Sprague gazed fixedly at the buccaneer.

"I have only to say that I believe you, under the protection of the flag you float, have been as lawless as a buccaneer in sailing the seas, and did your Government only know what you had been guilty of, under the guise of pirate-hunter, you would suffer the same penalty that I do."

The buccaneer spoke calmly, but every word was distinctly heard by the man he addressed.

Captain Sprague's face turned livid with rage, and he called out:

"Forward there! hasten those preparations to choke off this man's utterances."

"And, Senor Captain, let me add that if I do go, as I suppose I must, I have left you a reminder of me in that absent leg, and when you feel twinges of pain from it, and recognize that it is gone, as you must almost every moment of your life, you will remember Belmont the Buccaneer, and, in part, I will be avenged."

"Silence sir!" shouted Captain Sprague.

Unheeding, the buccaneer continued:

"You asked me if I had aught to say in this my last hour of life?"

"Yes," was the sullen reply.

"I would ask that you allow me an ink-horn, a quill and piece of paper, for I have a letter I would ask you to send for me."

"To whom?"

"To a friend in Havana."

"I will read its contents."

"Yes, if you can."

The order was given for pen, ink and paper and the buccaneer wrote several lines; but they were in cipher and unreadable to Captain Sprague, who said:

"The letter can do no harm, so I will send it for you."

"I thank you," and Belmont addressed it to "SENOR CARLOS CONRAD."

An address was given which Captain Sprague knew was a Sailor's Inn in Havana, and the buccaneer then sealed it with the ring he wore, and which was the insignia on his sable flag of the white skull and words around it:

"The World is Mine."

"Now, senor, as my schooner is at the bottom of the sea, I have no fortune to leave, so I am ready to meet my fate," was the cool reply of Belmont the Buccaneer.

"You are a brave man, I will say," said Captain Sprague, struck with admiration of the pluck of the buccaneer.

"Thank you."

"There is nothing else you would say?"

"Yes, I would have you say to the Senora Rodriguez that I loved her to the last, and regret having caused her a moment of pain."

"Also say to her that I did not cower in the face of death, even though my going out of life was at the end of the yard-arm," and the buccaneer smiled.

"Now I am ready, senor," and with a bow he held forth his hands to be ironed again, for one had been released for him to write the letter.

"Lead him forward to execution!" ordered Captain Sprague, and the buccaneer walked with bold step and fearless mien.

He did not flinch as the rope was placed about his neck, and said with a smile:

"Farewell, lads, I hold no grudge against you!"

The order then came to haul him up, and the body of the outlaw chief was drawn up to the yard-arm and caught the eyes of the crowd on shore.

Whatever his faults and crimes had been, the buccaneer had certainly died like a brave man.

And into port sailed the schooner, while she was greeted with ringing cheers.

Going ashore, Captain Sprague ordered his boat to return to the schooner, and a grave was dug in one corner of the little cemetery, near the sea, where the body of Belmont the Buccaneer was laid to rest.

After a short visit to Beacon Hill, Captain Sprague again set sail, having remained but only a few hours in his native town, to the great surprise of his fellow-citizens, who were anxious to do honor to him for the capture of the famous pirate Belmont, who had long been a curse upon the seas.

But, for reasons best known to himself, Captain Sprague did not allow one of his crew ashore, and hastened out of port as soon as he had seen the buccaneer laid in his grave, and he had driven up to Beacon Hill for half an hour's visit.

While in the town Captain Sprague had mailed the letter given him by Belmont, thus keeping his word to the man he had hanged at the yard-arm.

CHAPTER XXII.

WON AT LAST.

SEVERAL months after the hanging of Belmont the Buccaneer to the yard-arm of the American schooner, that trim-looking craft put into the little haven near the Buena Vista Plantation.

It was a pleasant afternoon, and Victorine was seated in an easy-chair in the little arbor overlooking the sea, while she was engaged in reading.

Near her, swinging to and fro in a hammock, was little Norma, while Esta, her guardian nurse, though half asleep, kept up the gentle motion that had soothed the pretty child to slumber.

Victorine's face was sad, but she looked very beautiful in her snowy robe, and her face showed that the poignancy of her grief for the loss of her husband had been overcome.

Glancing up from her book her eyes fell upon the white sails of the schooner, gliding slowly along the coast in the direction of the plantation haven.

She started at first, for it brought to her mind the vessel of Belmont the Buccaneer.

Had he escaped from his captor and was he again afloat on an armed deck and on his way to further persecute her?

But she recognized the schooner, and saw the Stars and Stripes at the peak.

Her face flushed and she called out:

"Look, Esta! there comes the vessel of that gallant American to whom I owe so much."

Esta sprung to her feet and gazed with interest upon the schooner, which was but a couple of miles away.

"He said he would come again," mused Victorine, "and that he would tell me that I would have nothing more to fear from that fearful man, Belmont the Buccaneer."

After a minute she continued her musing:

"He is coming, as he promised."

"But is Belmont the Buccaneer dead?"

"I shall never feel at rest until I know that he is."

"It has been just four months since Captain Sprague sailed, and seven months since the death of my poor husband."

"Alas! how sad has been my lot; but I have my darling little Norma and so have much to be thankful for, oh! so much, for, but for Captain Sprague it would have been more, far more."

"I can never forget him."

In a short while the schooner pointed into the harbor and then Victorine said:

"Esta, leave Norma sleeping where she is in the hammock, and go and tell Jose and Nora that we are to have guests, so to prepare for them."

"I will await here to greet Captain Sprague."

The negress departed, while a moment after Victorine caught sight of Captain Sprague standing upon his deck.

"Poor man! he lost his leg in my defense," she murmured, and she waved her kerchief, as she saw his face was turned upward.

Instantly the captain stepped to the flag halyards and dipped the colors three times in returning the salute.

Then the schooner swept up into the wind, the anchor was let fall, the sails furled and a boat put off from the shore.

Captain Sprague stepped ashore and began slowly to ascend the path toward the arbor.

With his crutches he made but slow progress, and as he approached the arbor Victorine greeted him.

It was a warm welcome she gave him, and she bade him be seated in her easy-chair to rest, while he said:

"I have come, Senora Rodriguez, to tell you that I kept my word."

"Belmont!"

"Is dead."

"When did he die?"

"Six weeks after leaving here."

"How?"

"At the yard-arm."

"Of your vessel?"

"Yes, senora."

"You had him hanged?"

"I avenged you, senora, and your husband."

"Ah, senor, you have been more than good to me," and tears dimmed the beautiful eyes.

For a moment Captain Sprague was silent, and then he said in a low, earnest tone:

"Senora, I have but done my duty in serving you, and I would that I could have done more, and saved your husband from death."

"But, alas! that could not be."

"I am a blunt sailor, senora, and one who has determined to give up the sea, for you see I am not much of a commander with one leg gone; but I have come here, too soon, perhaps, after the loss of your husband, to tell you that I love you with all my heart and soul and ask you to be my wife some day?"

"I have a home in America, which I would make you mistress of, and I have riches enough to support you in luxury."

"Your little child shall be as my own flesh and blood, I pledge you, and I will endeavor all in my power to make you happy."

"Will you be my wife some day, Victorine?"

Victorine's eyes were downcast, and her form trembled.

She had devotedly loved her noble husband; but he was dead, and her life was a desolate one.

She owed more than life to the American, and she greatly admired him.

She wished to leave Buena Vista, to get away from the scenes where she had known so much of joy and of pain, and she felt that Captain Sprague would make her a good husband, and be as a father to Norma.

So she said in reply, placing her hand in the grasp of the sailor:

"Senor, I cannot give you the love that Rafael Rodriguez won from me, for it is with him; but I admire you, honor you, and all the love that I have left in my heart you shall have, and when one year has gone by since the death of my husband, come to Buena Vista, and I will be your wife."

Never in his life before had Rufus Sprague known so much of happiness, and after several days passed at Buena Vista Plantation he set sail, promising to return at a given time.

And Victorine set to work to arrange for her departure from her Cuban home forever.

The plantation and slaves were sold, and one day a messenger arrived stating that Captain Sprague would come within two days, and that a packet ship *en voyage* for Boston, would touch at Buena Vista soon after to take on board the happy couple and little Norma, and bear them on to their American home.

True to his promise Rufus Sprague arrived, a priest was sent for, and one day after the year had gone by, since the loss of Rafael Rodriguez in the pirate schooner, Victorine became the wife of the American officer.

Several days after the ship came into the little harbor, the effects were put on board, the captain, his beautiful bride, and Esta carrying Norma in her arms followed, and the craft set sail on her northern voyage.

After a pleasant run the ship dropped anchor in Boston Harbor, and a few days after Victorine was welcomed to Beacon Hill, which had been repaired throughout and newly furnished to receive her.

But not one word had Captain Sprague said to his wife regarding his vessel, more than that he had resigned his commission and given up his schooner, and the citizens knew no more than she did; but for the service he had done they dubbed him "commodore" and gladly welcomed him home again and his beautiful wife into their midst.

And, under the direction of the "commodore" no who one could tell, told that little Norma was not his child, and the good folks of G— believed that he had been married for some years, and the romantic history of Victorine remained unknown.

And so Commodore Sprague determined it should be.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE BOATSWAIN'S STORY.

WHEN Carlos Conrad, the lieutenant of Belmont the Buccaneer, sailed in the lugger for a West India Island port, it will be remembered that he carried on board of the plantation lugger, the slaves who had been captured with Rafael Rodriguez and his wife.

He also had the valuable part of the cargo, of luggage and furniture which had been taken with the Cuban planter, and this, with the slaves, were to be sold in some port to agents of the buccaneer ever ready to purchase stolen goods, whatever they might be.

Boldly into the port of Kingston, Jamaica, Carlos Conrad ran the lugger, and landed his cargo of slaves and booty by night, and re-

ceived from the purchasing agent the gold which he received for all.

Then he set sail for the rendezvous with the schooner, and for weeks cruised about the vicinity hoping to find his vessel.

But the schooner did not appear, and though many a sail was sighted Carlos Conrad was soon made aware that it was not the pirate craft.

At last, fearing that harm had befallen his chief, he stood away for the island retreat of the buccaneers, to see if aught could be learned there.

This island was an out-of-the-way one of the Bahamas, and it was by no means easy of access, for it required the most careful pilotage to reach the land-locked harborage within its earthen arms.

For this reason it had proven a safe retreat for the sea outlaws, and Belmont the Buccaneer had sent thither much of his booty for which he could not find ready sale, and also some of his prizes, which, with their masts cut down could not be seen from vessels passing near when at anchor in the small harbor.

Upon the island, too, were kept the crippled among the pirate crews and a few other men as a guard.

To this retreat then Carlos Conrad went in the lugger, to learn if aught had been heard of the schooner.

He was growing very anxious about his commander, and this feeling was deepened when he arrived at the island and found that nothing had been seen of the schooner.

The island was a barren one, a very unattractive place in fact for a habitation; but men who were sea-robbers, and in hiding to escape the gallows, could not expect to find an Eden of loveliness to dwell in.

The coming of the lugger was welcomed with joy, as an event, by the score of cripples upon the island; but anxiety fell upon all when it became known that Carlos Conrad their lieutenant dreaded evil to their chief and his vessel.

After weeks had passed away at the island, and the schooner did not appear, Carlos Conrad decided to run to several ports in the lugger, as an island trader, and endeavor to find out if aught could be heard regarding the fate of Belmont the Buccaneer.

He had determined to set sail the following day, and had given orders to get the lugger in readiness when the lookout on the highest point of the rocky island signaled that something was in sight.

It was not a vessel, but was soon made out to be a life-boat.

It came on under oars alone, and was heading directly toward the entrance to the island harbor.

Of course there was nothing to fear from a boat's crew, though a dozen men were visible in it, and the islanders stood on the hill watching its approach until it reached the harbor.

Then upon the end of an oar a flag was hoisted in the boat.

It was a black field with a white skull in the center.

"It is a boat from the schooner!"

"The schooner is lost!"

"The chief is not there!"

"No officer is in the boat!"

"Yes, it is the schooner's life-boat!"

Such were the cries that arose upon all sides, and when at last the boat grounded upon the sandy beach of the little harbor, a man sprung out whom Carlos Conrad knew to have been boatswain upon the schooner.

"Manton, what does this mean?" he cried as he grasped the boatswain's hand and gazed into his haggard face.

"Give us food and drink first, senor, and then we can talk."

"We are almost starved to death," said the man hoarsely, and Conrad saw that the men were all haggard-faced and suffering, while most of them were too weak to get out of the boat.

Instantly willing hands brought them ashore and food and drink was given them, the half-starved wretches eating ravenously.

"Now, Manton, tell me what has happened?" said Carlos Conrad, and his own face grew white, while that of the boatswain was flushed from what he had eaten and the wine he had drunk.

"It's all over with the schooner, senor," was the sad reply of Boatswain Manton, and a groan from the crowd of buccaneers followed his words.

"Tell me just what has happened, Manton," ordered Carlos Conrad, quietly.

"Well, senor, after you sailed in the lugger, the schooner held on in the Gulf, and we got pretty close, in a fog, to a vessel which we soon found out was an armed schooner flying the American flag."

"She gave chase, and, in spite of our speed, gained and opened fire."

"Our guns would not reach her, and she well-nigh cut us to pieces before we could hit back, which Captain Belmont did by putting back to fight her."

"But though we boarded it was no use, for our men had been slain like wolves in a pen, and a storm coming up, we were obliged to

part the vessels, as our craft was threatening to go down."

"But the captain was taken, along with the lady captive, her child and the negress, and a few of our wounded lads who fell upon the cruiser's decks."

"Was Captain Belmont slain?" asked Conrad, while his eyes burned brightly, as though with hatred.

"He was wounded, I know, senor, but just how severely I am not aware; but he was made a prisoner, as I saw."

"And then?"

"Some of our lads lost their heads and sprung into the sea, and our wrecked schooner went surging away with the balance of us before the storm that struck us."

"She was leaking badly, and so I had the life-boat fitted out with what we needed, and as soon as the storm blew over, we left the wreck."

"And have been drifting about ever since?"

"Yes, senor, trying to make this island, and I can tell you that we have suffered bitter agony the past few days, for our provisions and water gave out, as you see."

"And the prisoner?"

"What prisoner, senor?"

"The Cuban planter, the husband of the senora."

"My heavens! I never thought of him!"

"He was in irons in the hold of the schooner, so went to the bottom in the wreck."

"I am sorry for this, for it will be a bitter blow upon his beautiful wife," and Carlos Conrad's face showed that he did feel for the unfortunate Victorine.

CHAPTER XXIV.

A VOW TO AVENGE.

THE crew that came in the life-boat to the island retreat of the buccaneers were indeed in need of rest and care, for they had suffered fearfully.

While waiting for them to recuperate, Carlos Conrad was forming his plans of action.

A strange tie of friendship had bound him to Belmont the Buccaneer.

Less cruel, less wicked than Belmont, he had often urged him to good, and he had loved him almost as a brother.

To have him die at the yard-arm, as he felt that he must, if he was not seriously wounded, was a severe blow to him, and he longed to be able to prevent it.

He therefore did all in his power for the rapid recovery of the men who had arrived in the life-boat, for he wished to at once leave the island and discover the fate of his chief.

He had the lugger fitted for a cruise, and his destination was the various ports of the West Indies, in a desire to learn, if he could, what had befallen Belmont.

From the West Indies, if unable to learn aught regarding him, he would touch at some American port on the Gulf, and then seek to discover what had befallen Belmont the Buccaneer.

To do this he would have to turn the lugger into a trader, and there was enough of booty on the island for him to make up a good cargo for trading.

He had, besides the crew he had brought with him, the men of the life-boat, and half a dozen whom he would take from the force on the island, and thus have, all told, some thirty men, all good seamen and trained under the eye of Belmont the Buccaneer.

When the men were sufficiently recovered to start, the lugger sailed away from the island retreat and made her way from port to port among the West Indies.

But no news had come of the fate of the schooner, and so Carlos Conrad boldly headed for Pensacola.

There the news had arrived of an American cruiser having sunk in action the famous vessel of Belmont the Buccaneer, the noted chief being taken prisoner.

From Pensacola Conrad sailed for New Orleans, and there he heard that Belmont the Buccaneer was certainly a captive to an American schooner-of-war, then cruising somewhere in the Gulf.

But just what cruiser it was no one seemed to know, and the news had been received from Cuba, where it was said the schooner-of-war had gone in a crippled condition after her action with the pirate.

To Havana then the lugger went, and Conrad sought his old haunt, where he had been wont to visit with Belmont when they were in that port.

Remembering his having been an actor in the duel there, between Belmont and Senor Rodriguez, he disguised himself to prevent recognition as he went up into the town.

The place he sought was a sailor's inn, kept by a man who was the Havana agent of Belmont for the shipping of men, when needed, and the sale of piratical booty.

His name was Vendome, and he was half French, half Spanish, while he spoke a dozen languages with equal fluency.

Senor Vendome received Conrad with a warm grasp of the hand, and, as he led him away to very comfortable quarters, he asked eagerly:

"How did you escape, senor?"

"You mean from the schooner?"

"Yes."

"I was not on board."

"And the poor captain is hanged!"

"Do you mean it, Vendome?"

"Yes, senor, for news comes from the United States that the American cruiser that sunk the chief's schooner, sailed into port on the Massachusetts coast with poor Captain Belmont swung up to the yard-arm."

"My God! Can this be true?"

"It is, Senor Conrad, for I have talked with the crew of an American clipper ship who know it to be true."

"This is awful, Senor Vendome."

"It is, senor; but tell me of yourself, and I am happy in seeing that you have escaped."

It was some moments before Carlos Conrad could comply, and then, in a low, suppressed voice, which showed his deep emotion at the loss of his commander and friend, he told Vendome of his leaving the schooner in the lugger, and what had followed, with the report of Manton the boatman.

"I have gone from port to port, Senor Vendome, trying to learn what had been done with Captain Belmont, and always hoping that, with his usual good luck he had escaped, and this news you make known to me is a fearful blow."

"I fear that it is true; but I had forgotten that I had a letter for you."

"A letter?" asked Conrad in surprise.

"Yes, it was received but yesterday, and came in the United States mail."

"I will get it," and so saying Senor Vendome left the room.

In a short while he returned, and Carlos Conrad, who was pacing to and fro, eagerly met him and grasped the letter.

"By Neptune! but it is in the writing of Captain Belmont."

"Yes, here is his seal! after all he is not dead."

Eagerly he broke the letter open and his eyes fell upon the cipher, traced by the pirate chief. His face grew white as he read, and his eyes burned fiercely.

"Well, senor?" asked Vendome anxiously.

"The letter is written in cipher, Vendome, and is from Captain Belmont."

"Then he yet lives?"

"No, he is dead, and has been for four weeks, according to the date hereon."

"It was written on board the American cruiser that captured him, months after his capture, and just before the captain's death, and in fact while they were rigging the rope to hang him at the yard-arm."

"This is fearful, Senor Conrad!"

"It is, Vendome, and the captain addressed this letter to me here, knowing that I would some day seek you, and he has left me a legacy."

"Ah! senor, his fortune?"

"No."

"Not his treasure?"

"No, for that went down in the schooner, you know."

"What then?"

"He has left me a legacy of hatred, a duty of revenge to do, and, before high Heaven, I vow to avenge him!"

"Do you hear, Vendome? I vow to avenge Frank Belmont, so note if I do so or not," and the voice of the young sailor quivered with the emotion that possessed him.

CHAPTER XXV.

TO THE MEMORY OF A PIRATE.

WHEN in the seclusion of his own room Carlos Conrad took out the letter of the dead pirate and read it over and over again, after Vendome had left him alone.

It brought back to him ringing memories of his own evil life, and before him in all its appalling horror he beheld the man he claimed his friend, struggling in dying agonies at the yard-arm.

He had gone wrong in his own career, and he had no aim in life, and what to do he did not know.

He could turn pirate again if so he wished, for he had already a small crew under his command and the procuring of a suitable craft would be an easy matter.

But for the present at least he determined not to again hoist the black flag.

He read over the letter from Belmont the Buccaneer, and he read the cipher aloud.

It was dated upon the schooner, and, as the reader will recall, was written just prior to the execution of Belmont by Captain Sprague.

The letter, as read by Conrad, was as follows:

"MY FRIEND CONRAD:—

"As I write these lines the shadow of death is upon me, for I am to be run up to the yard-arm of an American craft within five minutes."

"My vessel was overhauled by the cruiser, and he proved too strong for me."

"I boarded him, but could do nothing, so was surrounded and taken, while my men went down with the wrecked schooner, in the hold of which was the prisoner, Rafael Rodriguez."

"His wife and child were taken on board the cruiser, so that ended my dream of making the beautiful Victorine my wife some day."

"The cruiser's captain is one Rufus Sprague, and if I mistake not he was a privateersman during the war, and is simply an irregular now, pretending to be on the special duty of pirate-hunting, while in reality I believe him little better than a sea outlaw himself."

"He will hang me and then sail into his native port with my body swinging at the yard-arm, and thus end the days of your friend Belmont."

"To you, Conrad, all that I may leave, I bequeath to you, and I beg you to avenge me, for certainly I would avenge you."

"Farewell, my friend, a last farewell, and remember, at the bottom of the sea, or in a grave, wherever my body shall lie, it will never rest until you have avenged me."

FRANK BELMONT,
"Buccaneer."

Such was the letter which Carlos Conrad read, and it made a deep impression upon him.

It caused him to vow to avenge the buccaneer.

To do this he set about carrying out his plans at once.

The cargo of the lugger was disposed of, and the men were paid off most liberally, all except a few who were needed as a crew to the vessel.

Then he sailed for the island retreat and made known to those there that the buccaneer band was broken up.

A division of the spoils was made, and then the island was deserted and the lugger, with all on board set sail for Havana.

There they parted company, the lugger was sold and Carlos Conrad took passage in a clipper ship bound for Boston.

Arriving in that port he was not long in finding out which was the craft that had captured and hanged Belmont the Buccaneer, and the home of her commander.

To G— then he went by stage, and those who were glad to tell him the story of the hanging of Belmont the Buccaneer at the yard-arm, little dreamed who it was that they were talking to.

The whole story he heard, and how the gallant captain, who had been dubbed "commodore," had lost his leg in the action, and, giving up the sea, had just returned to his native home to live, being accompanied by a beautiful wife, whom he had married in Cuba, and his child.

The grave by the sea, where lay the buccaneer chief, was shown to Conrad, who also gazed with deep interest upon the home of Commodore Sprague.

Then Carlos Conrad left G—, having determined upon a plan of action to gain revenge.

Several months after, one dark, stormy night a small vessel stood into the little port, shortly after dark, and boats went to and from the shore.

Just before dawn the craft put to sea again, while the rains descended in torrents.

All day long it stormed, the rain pouring down and keeping the people within doors; but the following morning the storm had passed and the sun arose in a clear sky.

Then it was that the good sexton of the little church surrounded by the graves of many dead, was startled by beholding an object in the graveyard which he had never before seen.

It was a Sabbath morning and he had gone over to open the church for services.

He stood, rubbing his eyes to see if he was not mistaken. But not there in the corner of the burying ground nearest the sea, he beheld a monument which he had never seen there before.

It was an imposing stone monument, and going toward it the good sexton's eyes opened wide with astonishment as he saw that it had been erected to the memory of Belmont the Buccaneer.

In amazement he ran to ring the bell and alarm the people.

They came in crowds, and all feasted their astonished eyes upon the monument; but not one could solve the mystery.

Under cover of the night the stone had been erected, and not one dared touch it with impious hand though it was over the grave of a buccaneer.

Not a trace of from whence it came could be found, for the driving rain had obliterated any marks that had been made, and many were superstitious enough to assert in whispers that Satan had erected it over one so near akin to him as had been Belmont the Buccaneer.

Commodore Sprague was also troubled about it, and its presence seemed to affect him unpleasantly, for he shunned the burying-ground and even the little church.

But time passed on and the mystery remained unsolved, while the monument to the buccaneer came to be regarded with awe and superstition by many of the villagers, none of whom dared go near the burying-ground at night.

CHAPTER XXVI.

AN OLD SHIPMATE.

THAT it was Carlos Conrad who erected the monument over the ashes of Belmont the Buccaneer, the reader doubtless has understood.

He was determined that the spot where rested the body of his friend, should not go unmarked, and by night he carried the monument there in a small vessel, and placed it over the grave.

Then Carlos Conrad returned to carry out his plot to avenge his friend.

What he had received from the booty sold,

was not a very large sum, and the demands upon his purse had been severe; but he still had a few thousands in gold, and so determined to strike at Commodore Sprague at once.

That he had deceived the people of the town about his having been married several years, and the little Norma being his child, he had at once discovered, for, having gained sight of Victorine, he saw that she was the beautiful Cuban lady whom his chief had captured with her husband.

That husband, Senor Rodriguez, he knew had gone to the bottom of the sea in the wrecked schooner, and he did not doubt but that Senora Victorine had married the American captain out of gratitude.

"It cannot be that she loves him dearly, and so his being taken off will not break her heart."

"I will fit out a craft, kidnap him and carry him to the island retreat, where I shall leave him to starve and die alone."

"That will avenge Frank Belmont."

"But I will let it be thought that he was drowned, so he will not be expected to turn up again, and then I shall come back and win the love of that beautiful woman, if it is in my power to do so, and I do not wonder that poor Belmont adored her."

"What money I have will fit the craft out, and then, in some way, I must manage to get a snug sum which will enable me to be considered a rich man, for riches go a long way in love-making."

"Yes, I will go to New York now, and get a suitable craft, and then to strike a blow upon Rufus Sprague to avenge Frank Belmont."

"It may be then, that I can pick up a rich prize, to put me in funds, though I did not wish to go back to piracy again."

"But if not, I will seek Havana and make Vendome fit me out with a craft, for he has made a large fortune out of Belmont."

"Then, with a good vessel and crew, I can soon capture prizes enough to make me independent, and will give up the sea and make my home in G—, claiming to be a gentleman of leisure and wealth, and my aim will be to win that beautiful Cuban woman."

"Oh! if the schooner had only not sunk, for she had a fortune on her, yes a vast fortune in treasure, and Belmont made me his heir."

"Now to set about my plot," and having thus decided upon his plans, Carlos Conrad took passage on a packet for New York.

He had just landed and was making his way to a tavern, when he was startled by hearing his name called.

Turning he beheld a man in sailor garb hurrying after him.

He was an evil-browed looking fellow, and evidently not an American by birth.

"Ah! Senor Conrad, I thought that I could not be mistaken in that splendid form and handsome face."

"Do you not know me?"

The man spoke with a slight accent, and gazed fixedly into the face of the pirate lieutenant.

It was evident that Conrad did recognize him, but he did not seem to wish to do so, for he said in a cold manner:

"I think you are mistaken, my man."

"No, senor, I am not mistaken, for I sailed under your orders too long not to know you."

"I am Antonio, once bo'sen under you on the schooner Sea Lance."

"Ah, yes, I recall you now, Antonio; but you wore a beard then?"

"Yes, senor."

"It has changed you greatly to shave it off; but how has the world used you, my man?"

"Badly of late, senor; but I have good prospects ahead, and I will be glad of your aid, senor, for there will be enough for two."

Conrad knew the man as a plucky fellow, and one who loved gold.

His referring to a plan in which there was gold to make, suggested to him the thought that he might get a snug sum to aid him in his plans.

So he said:

"Well, Antonio, I am willing to help you, and I may give you a job too, so come to my house to-night."

"I will stop at the Anchor Inn yonder."

"And your name?"

"Conrad, as before, Antonio."

"I did not know but that you might have changed it ashore, senor; but I will be there," and the man went on his way, while Conrad walked on to the tavern and was soon in comfortable quarters.

After supper Antonio called, and following a short conversation Conrad asked:

"Well, Antonio, what is it you have on hand?"

"Do you remember, senor, that the captain of an American privateer turned pirate and kept up his flag as a cruiser of the United States?"

"I believe a number of the most reckless of the privateersmen, would not give up their vessels after the war and went to buccaneering."

"There was one whom I served under, having been captured by his vessel the time you sent me off in the boat on a secret mission, when we were lying off Vera Cruz."

"Yes, and you never returned."

"I was captured, senor, by a vessel which was supposed to be flying the American flag in honor, but which was doing piratical work on the sky."

"I shipped to save myself, of course, and was with the craft nearly a year."

"Then I deserted, and have knocked about the land and sea since, with luck against me."

"But two months ago I shipped on a coaster and we ran into a port on the Massachusetts coast under stress of weather."

"While ashore I saw a face I remembered, for I seldom forget a face, senor, and who do you think it was?"

"I do not know, Antonio."

"It was none other than the captain of the craft that had captured me."

"Indeed?"

"Yes, senor, and he had lost a leg since I saw him."

Conrad started at this and asked:

"Did you say the port was on the Massachusetts coast?"

"Yes, senor, it was the port of G—."

"Indeed?"

"Yes, senor, and I at once asked about the captain and found out to my joy that he was a native of the place and was very rich."

"His house, an elegant mansion, was pointed out to me situated upon a hill above the town, and they told me that he had married a rich Cuban wife and settled down to enjoy a life of luxury."

"Well, Antonio?"

"Now, senor, I am poor, very poor, and I at once saw my plan, to act so as to get riches."

"As how, Antonio?"

"Well, I could go to him, for I did not make myself known, and returned here but yesterday in the coaster, and telling him that I would expose him, force him to give me a large sum of money."

"Yes, it looks as though you could, Antonio."

"It does, senor, and I am willing to invest it in a craft, have you as captain and go as first luff myself, and once more sail the seas under the black flag, for since Captain Belmont was hanged, merchant vessels cover the ocean."

"A good plan, Antonio, and as I am in hard luck, I will give you my aid in the matter."

"Suppose I go to this man for you, and get him to pay a large silence fund?"

"I am willing, senor, for I would rather that you should go, as if he recognized me, he might shoot me down at once."

"Let us go by the first packet to G—."

Carlos Conrad was silent for a few moments, and he appeared to be in deep thought.

Then he said:

"Antonio, come with me, for I wish you to first help me in a little affair," and the two left the tavern together.

CHAPTER XXVII.

QUICK PUNISHMENT.

WHEN Carlos Conrad left the tavern with the sailor Antonio, he had formed a plot in his mind that will now be laid bare.

He had started at the strange circumstance of Antonio having as his game the very man that he was plotting against.

It was a coincidence that troubled him.

The sailor had let him into a secret against Commodore Sprague, which at once gave him power over him.

As the commodore had been guilty of lawless acts, known to Antonio, the knowledge of those very acts could be held over him in a manner that would make him pay liberally for silence.

Once he had gained from him a large sum, he could then do away with him and thus avenge his chief.

But knowing what Antonio did about him, Conrad saw that it would not be necessary to go to the expense of chartering a vessel which was to carry him to the island retreat and then go upon a gold-making cruise.

No; Antonio had let him into a most important secret, and he would use it for his own good.

He did not like the man Antonio.

He feared that he was one who would betray his best friend for gold.

He had shown that he had a good memory, and he was therefore dangerous.

Possessed of Antonio's secret, Antonio was of no use to him.

In truth, it was better to get rid of the man.

Once rid of him, Commodore Sprague was at his mercy, to bleed for a large amount of gold, and then he could get rid of him.

No one should suspect him, and he could then go to G— and win the widow of the man he had robbed and then slain.

Such were the thoughts that were passing through the mind of Carlos Conrad, as he listened to the story of Antonio.

So when he told him he wished him to aid him in a little matter, he led him away from the tavern down toward the river.

On the way he gleaned from him all that he could regarding the lawless acts which Antonio knew Commodore Sprague to have been guilty

of, and the scenes, time, and just what they were.

Reaching the wharves, Conrad said:

"Antonio, I have a friend on board a vessel at anchor down the harbor, and we will board his craft and get from him what money we need."

"Here is a boat which we will take."

Antonio saw no reason to suspect harm to himself.

He merely thought that the pirate officer was not possessed of sufficient funds to carry them to G—, and so he entered the boat and at once took the oars, while Conrad seated himself in the stern and took the tiller.

Down the harbor the boat went, Conrad steering as he wished, and Antonio pulling a strong stroke that sent them swiftly along.

The night was very dark, for clouds obscured the skies, and as it was late no boats were abroad upon the waters.

The lights from vessels here and there at anchor in the harbor grew less frequent, and Governor's Island had been left astern, when Antonio asked:

"How much further away is the craft, senior, for this is a long pull."

"Rest on your oars, Antonio, and look ahead, just one point off the starboard bow, and you will see the craft."

"But I believe a boat lies in our way ahead."

Antonio let fall his oars and turned to look ahead.

As he did so Conrad arose and approached him, while he said:

"Just there, Antonio."

"I see a vessel, senior, but no boat in our course—oh God!"

The words broke from his lips as a knife descended to the hilt in his body, driven by the strong hand of Carlos Conrad.

In an instant the form of Antonio was raised in the strong arms of Conrad and hurled over into the waters, sinking from sight and drowning the cry for mercy that was upon the dying lips.

For a moment Carlos Conrad gazed down into the dark waters, and there came from his lips the words:

"It is better so, for now I hold the secret against Rufus Sprague."

"Ha! there is a boat!"

"I wonder if those in it heard his cry and the splash?"

He seized the oars quickly and held on his way, for he discovered a boat coming rapidly along astern.

He rowed with a rapid and powerful stroke; but the boat was not a light one, and the one astern gained upon him.

"There are four oarsmen in that boat, and I verily believe they are in chase," he said through his shut teeth.

Then he thought of the knife, and towed it overboard, while he quickly washed his hands of the red stains upon them, while he dashed water upon the seat and gunwale to erase any crimson marks that might have been there.

Quickly resuming his oars he pulled on rapidly for awhile, then turned about as though at fault, and next coolly hailed the coming boat, now very near to him.

"Ho that boat!" he called out.

"Ay, ay, we are coming."

"I am lost, I fear, for I was looking for a coasting packet," he said calmly.

The next moment the boat dashed up, the oarsmen "backed water" and it was alongside.

There were four oarsmen and two persons in the stern.

"Who are you?" asked one of the latter.

"My name is Carlos Conrado, and I am looking for a craft in which I arrived from Boston this morning."

"Do you belong on the craft?"

"No, but I have lost a ring, and think I must have left it in my berth on the brig."

"What was the name of the vessel?"

"The Puritan."

"Did she not go to her wharf?"

"Yes, but her captain said he would anchor in the harbor, as he had to go in the dock for repairs; but who are you that questions me?"

"A Harbor Patrol Officer."

"Ah, yes, I beg pardon."

"Where is the man who left with you in your boat?"

It was too dark for Conrad's start to be seen; but he answered calmly:

"I had no one with me."

"You certainly had, and more, we heard a piercing cry, as though from a man dealt a death-blow and it came from this boat."

"You are mistaken, sir, about its coming from this boat, though I too heard the cry."

"It came from a boat I saw ahead of me."

"I am certain that this is the boat, and you must return with us."

Conrad could do nothing else than obey, and he was told to get in the barge, which at once took his own boat in tow.

He appeared to be sure that the patrol officer would find out that he was mistaken, and was perfectly cool.

But at the landing a lantern was brought and his sleeves were found to be wet, there was water on the gunwale and seats, and the officer said:

"I am sure you have committed murder, for you are the man I saw pass under the street lamp an hour ago, and you had a companion with you."

"I saw you enter your boat, and your comrade went with you, and now you are alone, while we heard a cry from human lips like from a dying man."

"We will go with you to the Anchor Tavern where you say you stop."

They did so, and there inquiry proved that Carlos Conrado, as he called himself, had left the tavern some two hours before with a companion dressed in sailor garb.

So to the lock-up Carlos Conrad was taken to await his trial, and that followed speedily, and, unable to give an account of himself, he was found guilty of murdering some one unknown to his accusers, and was sent to prison for life, his punishment following quickly upon his crime.

"My God! what a fate! but I will not despair for I shall soon leave these gloomy walls," he said, as the iron gate closed with a dismal clang upon him.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

A PRISONER.

WITH Belmont the Buccaneer in his grave in the little churchyard of G—, Carlos Conrad shut out from the world behind the iron bars of a prison, sentenced for life for a murder all his accusers were sure that he had committed, and Rufus Sprague dwelling in calm serenity at Beacon Hill, with his beautiful wife and pretended daughter, let me ask the kind reader to return with me to that fateful night of storm upon the Gulf, when the buccaneer's crew boarded the cruiser in the frenzy of despair.

Beaten back, their chief wounded and taken, and Victorine, her child and the negress borne on board the cruiser, the pirates had returned in frenzy to their own deck, a few brave, but wicked men.

As has been told the schooner had suffered fearfully under the fire of the cruiser, and the cry that she was sinking had been raised, which had caused the grapnels to be cast off, and the two vessels drifted apart.

In their terror some of the pirate crew had sprung into the sea.

But others, with more nerve, and presence of mind, had looked about to save themselves in some way.

The storm came with a rush, and the hull, with its masts gone and sides shattered, became a mere plaything for the winds and waves.

The decks were swept of the dead and wounded and the able-bodied men only saved their lives by lashing themselves as best they could.

The guns broke soon from their fastenings and went dashing through the bulwarks into the sea, and those on board expected each moment to see the vessel go down beneath them.

At last one brave fellow called out that the life-boat was unharmed, and at once willing hands got her ready for launching.

Stores and clothing, water-casks and oars were placed in her, and, after a fearful night of peril, the crew launched their life-boat and pulled away from the sinking ship, which they expected momentarily to go down.

Away they drove over the wild waters, and the tossing, rolling wreck was lost to sight astern.

That the life-boat, after long weeks of drifting about at last reached the island retreat of the buccaneers has been seen, and so I will follow the driving wreck of the pirate schooner.

Relieved of the weight of her guns, her crew, masts, spars and sails, not to speak of her boats, the hull of the schooner rose some two feet out of the water above her regular water line.

This caused the wounds in the stern, which had been below the water line, to rise above it and thus her steady leaking had stopped.

Had the schooner remained at her former depth, the leak would have sent her to the bottom in a few hours.

But, only the dashing of the waves against the holes in the hull now caused her to take in water, and otherwise she was comparatively free from leaking.

The result of this was that she was no longer in danger of sinking, and went driving along over the waves before the pressure of the wind.

When the men who had fled in the life-boat had departed, they had forgotten that they left a human being on board.

That one was none other than Rafael Rodriguez, who, in double irons, had been sent down in the hold by Belmont the Buccaneer.

He had been in despair at the capture of his wife and himself, by one who he knew was merciless.

He had heard the firing of the cruiser in-shore, and, a sailor himself, he had noted that the sound of the guns grew louder and louder.

A shot or two from the pirate craft, and then silence, convinced him that the guns of the buccaneer would not reach his pursuer.

Then louder and louder grew the firing from astern, and he knew that the pursuer was steadily gaining, and hope surged up in his heart that the pirate would be taken.

No one came down into the hold, and he could learn nothing as to who or what the vessel in-shore was.

All was darkness about him, until suddenly there came a crash, a shower of splinters flew about him, and a solid shot tore through the hull and spent its force forward against the stout timbers.

Then there came a rush of waters, and he knew that the schooner was leaking badly, and hope left his heart as he bowed his head in despair.

CHAPTER XXIX.

CAST ASHORE.

WITH the schooner bounding and rolling in the rough sea, the roar of the waves and howling of the winds, which came to his ears, even in that dismal hold; with the rush of the waters through the hole torn by the solid shot in the hull, it was no wonder that Rafael Rodriguez, brave as he was, felt utter despair.

For some time he held his head bent, his face covered by his manacled hands, and then came to him the knowledge that the schooner was going about, for he could tell by its movements.

Then followed the loud, stern commands of Belmont the Buccaneer, and next the roar of the guns, and they told him that the pirate had put about and was striking back.

Would victory be his, or would Right be triumphant.

"What is done must be quickly done, or that leak will send this craft to the bottom," he said aloud.

Then came the skurrying of rats, driven from their lair by the rising waters, and they clustered about him as though for company in their terror.

The crashing of timbers on decks, the shouts, the groans, the tearing of iron hail told him that a fierce fight was waging.

Then came a terrific crash, soon after followed by a shock, and he knew that the two vessels had come together.

The fierce trampling of feet, curses, cries, shrieks of anguish, followed by the rasping sounds of the two hulls as they were held together, made up a fearful pandemonium for the ears of the prisoner in irons.

But it did not last long, for the grapnels were cast off, the two vessels swung apart, and then Rafael Rodriguez felt that the other vessel had been beaten off.

But there were sounds of fewer feet on deck, and these were hurrying to and fro, and then the schooner, which his experience told him was not under steerageway, was almost thrown upon her beam-ends.

"There has a fearful storm struck us."

"Will she live it through?"

"My God! what of my wife and child?"

These questions rung out in the darkness of the place, startling the rats into flight.

Soon he knew that the schooner was not under steerageway, but driving along before the storm.

There were heavy plunges in the sea, crashing timbers and cries, and he felt that the guns were breaking from their castings and going overboard.

That the schooner had lost her masts he was also certain, and, to his delight, he discerned that the hull had risen out of the water, lightened as it had been, until the shot-hole in the stern was not below the water-line, and only water dashing in caused her to leak.

After awhile there came hammering sounds on deck, scuffling feet, stern orders, and then a plunge.

"What does it mean?" he asked himself.

There were now no voices heard on deck, and only the waters and shrieking of the tempest.

But on the schooner drove, wallowing fearfully, plunging and with decks washed clean.

"My God! they have deserted the vessel, believing her sinking, and I alone am left on board."

"Ay, left to die! but what of my wife and child?"

"Heaven preserve them now, whatever my fate may be!"

On drove the wreck, the prisoner, ironed hand and foot, and the chains riveted to the deck, calmly awaiting his fate.

As dawn drew near the storm abated, the wreck pitched less wildly, and streams of light soon appeared, looking in from the shot-holes in the stern and sides.

The dim light enabled him to see about him, and he was sure that the ship was utterly deserted, and that he had been left to his fate.

The irons upon his wrists and ankles were massive, the chains heavy, and the ring-bolt to which he was bound no human strength could break.

"I will die here, chained like a dog," he said with the calmness of despair.

And on, on drifted the wreck, and no longer did it plunge in rough waters.

Then the day dragged its weary length away

and darkness fell, for no longer came the light streaming through the shot-holes.

The night was an age, and full of anguish to the prisoner.

But at length the daylight appeared, and as it did so there came to his ears the howling of another storm that was approaching.

Could the wreck stand the shock?

"Better, perhaps," he thought, "that the wreck goes down and my anguish ends at once."

But the wreck met the shock, and though tossed about like a cork in a whirlpool went driving along.

At length there came a grating sound.

It was beneath her keel, and the sailor knew that she was being driven ashore.

Another grating sound, a tremor of the hull, then a rise on a mighty wave, followed by a plunge and a shock that seemed to shiver every timber in the wreck, and almost stunned the prisoner.

There was a momentary creaking and crashing of timbers, as the wreck settled upon its bed of rocks, and then Rafael Rodriguez knew that the hull was at a standstill, and had been driven hard upon a rocky shore.

One moment of fearful anxiety, and as he glanced about him, for a crevice in the deck, a long split made by the shock caused him to behold something which brought from his lips a long, loud cry, a cry that frightened the rats, causing them to scatter and fly away from the human being whom, in their terror they had seemed to seek for sympathy.

CHAPTER XXX.

HOPE AND DESPAIR.

WHAT had wrung from the lips of Rafael Rodriguez the wild cry, was that his eyes had fallen upon a strange sight.

This was none other than that the shock of the wreck striking upon the rocks with such terrific force, had split in twain the timber into which the ringbolt had been imbedded.

This released the bolt, and though still in irons the Cuban was no longer chained to the deck.

So his cry had been one of joy, of hope.

He arose, shook himself, stretched his chained hands over his head, and tried to shake off the numbness that was upon him from his long confinement.

Then he made his way to the hatch and up the steps to it.

But his strength would not move it as it was lashed down from the deck.

A bundle of handspikes tied together caught his eye, and one of these he quickly seized upon.

But he could not get the end under the hatch, as it was too large.

Back to where he had seen some old cutlasses, knives and muskets he went, and taking one of the latter from a rack he discovered that it was loaded.

A powder-horn was near, among other traps, for he was in a cuddy where all manner of odds and ends about a ship were kept, and priming the pan of the musket, he aimed it at a corner of the hatch and fired.

It tore a small hole there, and again and again he loaded the gun and fired; but it was slow work, ironed as he was.

At last however he had made a small, ragged hole, and into this he stuck a cutlass blade and began to cut it out.

He was weak for want of food; but he worked on steadily until night came and then went back to his cot to rest.

Utterly worn out he did not waken until a stream of sunshine peering through a crevice fell upon his face.

He took it as a good omen and arose and started again at his work, refreshed yet suffering for want of food.

A couple of hours passed and he was enabled to make a hole through which he could get the end of the handspike.

With this as a purchase he swung his weight upon it and, after several efforts tore up one corner of the hatch.

A shout broke from his lips at his triumph, and he went to work with renewed vigor, and at last was enabled to get an opening through which he could drag himself.

It was by a great effort that he pulled himself through to the deck.

Once free from the loathsome hold and out into the bright sunshine his brain reeled and he fell his length upon the deck.

He had swooned from want of food, over-exertion and the rush of joy at his triumph.

For a long time he lay like one dead.

But at last he recovered, and sitting up looked about him.

His head had struck the iron manacles on his wrist and cut a gash that was bleeding freely and this had revived him.

Unmindful of the wound he arose and gazed about him.

He saw an island, barren and rocky, and with only a clump of small trees in sight.

It was a most forbidding spot, and the wreck had been cast high and dry upon the rocky shores.

When lashed into fury by the storms the

waves would reach the wreck, but otherwise it was above high-water mark.

The wreck was badly shattered, its back being broken, and its masts gone, and bulwarks broken in many places, and forward completely torn away.

The hatches had remained firm, and the cabin companionway had been securely closed.

Thitber Rafael Rodriguez made his way, and opening the companionway descended into the cabin.

The sea had not broken in there, but all around was a scene of confusion.

There were several dead bodies upon the floor, some of the crew of the schooner, the furniture had been overturned, and it looked as though a hasty search had been made for the hiding-place of Belmont the Buccaneer's treasure.

"Oh that my poor wife and child had been left here," groaned the unhappy man.

But a rapid search revealed no living being on board, other than himself, and shot-holes in the schooner's sides showed that the iron messengers had torn through the cabin.

Food was what Rafael Rodriguez most needed, and he quickly sought the steward's pantry and eagerly devoured what he could find in the way of edibles.

"I shall not starve at least, for there are enough stores aboard to last a year," he said.

Dragging the dead bodies upon deck he tossed them overboard, and then lay down to rest, for he sadly needed it.

Night came on and the prostrate man slept on; but another dawn broke and he quickly began the day's work.

After breakfast, he sought to find something by which he could free himself of his irons.

A search in the carpenter's chest revealed some files, and with them he began to rid himself of his chains.

But it was slow, tedious and weary work, and it was not until two days passed that he had filed the manacle through on his left wrist.

As long a time was taken in cutting the right hand manacle in twain, and having worn the half-dozen files he had nearly smooth it was a week before he freed his ankles from the chains upon them.

He had found provisions enough in the pantry to support him the while, and when, at last freed of his irons, he felt like another being.

His legs were stiff, and his bones sore, but a bath in the sea helped him and he went ashore to see what manner of place he had been cast upon.

It was an island, half a mile in length, narrow and curving.

It was almost barren, save the clump of trees before referred to, and where there was a grass plot an acre in size, with a tiny spring bubbling up out of a gravel bed.

The whole shore was rocky and forbidding, and Rafael Rodriguez could see that the waves, when a tempest was sweeping the seas, must break over nearly the whole island.

"I am as much a prisoner here as I would be upon the wreck."

"But I will not give up hope, and make myself as comfortable as possible."

So saying, he set to work to erect himself a hut, from what he brought from the wreck.

Then he took his provisions ashore and stowed them away, knowing how precious they were.

In a week's time he had made himself most comfortable, and had taken from the wreck all that could be saved from the stores of provisions, well knowing how precious they were to him.

But when his work was done, and he realized that he had no boat, no means of building one, and that not a sail had he seen passing the island, his heart sunk within him, and he seemed as though he would utterly yield to despair at his fearful fate.

CHAPTER XXXI.

A PIRATE'S TREASURE.

It was when the work which he had laid out for himself to do was over that the lonely islander began to realize his situation.

He knew that the island must be one of the West India group, far off the course of vessels, and that he might have to remain there for a long time, perhaps forever.

He had ample stores to last him several years, if taken care of, fish were abundant and wild fowl frequently visited the island, so there was no danger of starvation staring him in the face.

At length he set out work for himself to do, and this was to carry all that was valuable on the schooner up to his little cabin home and build a shelter over it.

There were a number of arms, of all kinds upon the vessel, and plenty of powder that had not been spoiled by the sea.

Then in the hold of the schooner there was a goodly supply of booty, and he knew that a storm from the eastward, more severe than the one which had driven the wreck high upon the rocks, would break the hull into fragments.

So he began the removal of all that was in the schooner and worked diligently until he felt that he could soon accomplish the task he had set himself to do.

The carpenter's chest he found a valuable

thing indeed, and he already began to think of building a boat out of the ship's timbers, in which he could leave the island.

While selecting planking from the cabin he inadvertently brought to view a secret receptacle.

It had evidently been made for a particular purpose, and that purpose was to conceal there the iron chest of the buccaneer chief.

The pulling off of the planking revealed a trap, and in it was an oak chest, stoutly bound with iron bands.

With considerable difficulty this chest, which was very heavy, was raised from its place and gradually gotten upon deck.

There it was lowered to the rocks, and a rudely-constructed, but serviceable wheelbarrow, was brought into use to carry it up to the cabin of the islander.

The work in moving it had been severe, and tired out with the exertion he ate his supper and retired.

About midnight he was awakened by the howling of the winds, and he quickly realized that he had been wise in building his cabin in a sheltered spot, and making it substantial enough to resist a hard blow.

The wind came from the eastward, and increased in violence until it blew a hurricane.

The waves dashed upon the island with a force that shook it to its foundation, and the spray from the sea fairly drenched the cabin as with a heavy rain.

Putting on his storm-suit, Rafael Rodriguez started forth to have a look at the wreck.

As he neared the shore he heard the crashing and creaking of timbers, and he knew that his vessel was going to pieces rapidly.

It was just such a night as the one on which the wreck had been driven high upon the surf, and the hurricane forced the waves against the hull with force enough to shatter it.

High and dry the wreckage was cast, and when the storm broke the vessel was no more.

Far and wide along the rocky shores the debris was strewn, and the lonely islander set to work to gather up the timbers and planking for future use.

He knew not how long he would have to remain on the desolate island, and he was in hopes that with the tools and material he had, he might be able to construct a small boat that would enable him to leave the spot upon which a kind Fate had driven him, for had the schooner not have struck there, it would have doubtless gone to the bottom, or been driven upon sunken reefs and gone to pieces, sending its solitary occupant to a grave in the sea.

The timber was safely gathered together, and a spot was selected for the building of the boat which Rafael Rodriguez began to feel would be his only chance of leaving the island.

This occupied several days of hard work, from dawn to darkness, and the treasure had not yet been examined.

But at last there was no work to do, and the sailor turned his attention to his treasure, which strange to say, he had not felt any very strong desire to overhaul.

Had he been differently situated it may be that he would have at once sought to know the value of his find.

But food was worth more there than gold, and alone as he was the treasure was utterly useless.

With tools taken from the carpenter's chest, he set to work to open the strong box.

Hardly had he done so, when he gave a shout that rung over the island.

Before him was a vast fortune, and the sight of it seemed suddenly to turn his brain.

He had been accustomed to riches all his life, and he had never known the end of gold.

And yet the sight of the treasure which he had before him gave him an attack of what miners call the "gold fever."

He shouted, laughed, danced and almost wept with the conflicting emotions that came over him.

For a while his desolate situation, his lost wife and child, all were forgotten and he revelled in the joy of his possessions.

There at his feet was a fortune that was equal to the riches of a king.

There were jewels of many kinds, bracelets, necklaces, earrings, finger-rings, watches and many other articles of value.

Then there were bags of gold and silver, and in fact just such a rare booty as might be gained by robbing the passengers of scores of vessels.

"This fortune is mine!" he shouted.

Then as suddenly his humor changed and he stood regarding it in silence.

"But how has it been gained?" he asked himself in a low tone.

"I have not sinned in getting it, and yet every piece of gold and silver, every trinket has been stained with blood."

"Those who have been robbed of their gold and valuables, have in many cases, been slain, and haunting phantoms seem to hover over this strong box to guard the treasure."

"It is mine, yes, and yet, if I am here, wifeless, childless, homeless, what do I need with money?"

"I will keep it, and, when I leave here, if I

ever do, I will devote it to good, to helping those who need aid."

So he said, and then without closing the box he walked away.

He was worth a large fortune, and yet it now held no charms for him.

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE SAILOR'S VENTURE.

FOR weeks after his discovery of the vast value of the treasure, which had been the booty of Belmont the Buccaneer, Rafael Rodriguez went about like one in a dream.

He seemed to have almost lost interest in life, and ate, drank and slept mechanically.

Thus the time passed away until one night he had a dream.

He beheld his old plantation home of Buena Vista on the Cuban coast.

He saw his wife and child there, and it came before his vision that a form was wandering about the grounds as though to keep guard over those he loved.

Then the form he beheld in the rooms of the the mansion, and it took on the appearance of Satan.

He started in his dream, and then sprung to his feet, while in his ears seemed to ring the words:

"Delay not, but save your wife and child!"

He was in a cold perspiration and seemed for a few moments unable to collect his mind or will.

But at last he grew calm and walked to the point on the shore where he had piled up the timber which he had collected from the schooner's wreckage.

Mechanically he had gone there, and, as his eyes fell upon the pile of wreckage, he said aloud:

"How strange that dream, and stranger still, that, in a half-awake mood my feet should have come hither.

"A fatality leads me in this, and something bids me not delay, not to idle my hours away, but to work.

"For three months I have remained here, and not a sail have I seen upon the sea.

"In all that time I have struck no blow to get away, and I feel that I must depend upon myself alone.

"I will begin work with the next sunrise."

He returned to his couch and again sunk to sleep.

This time he had no dream, but awoke with the rising sun.

What he had passed through in the night seemed like a hideous nightmare to him.

But he had not forgotten his resolve, and, after breakfast he went over to the pile of wreckage.

He stood for a long time regarding it, and then he examined the shore for a place to lay his keel.

There was a small indenture in the rocks, which at very high tide during a storm, he had noticed was filled with water to the depth of seven or eight feet.

It was some hundred feet in length, thirty in width, and had a sandy bottom.

The mouth, or entrance, was about fifty feet in width and each side was massive rock.

In truth it seemed like the hull of some large vessel.

After regarding it for some time, Rafael Rodriguez decided to take advantage of it for the building of his vessel.

He saw that he could, while the weather was good, draw up the outer end level with the top of the rocks on either side, and this would leave him a basin in which to lay his keel and build his craft.

He began by bracing massive timbers across the mouth of the opening, and some ten feet apart.

It was hard work, but he managed to get the timbers in place.

Then he boarded up the two walls, and began to carry stone and throw on the sea side of the outer wall.

He had hardly completed this, when a severe storm came up and he was rejoiced to see that his work of a month was not materially injured.

Next, with the aid of his wheelbarrow, he carried small stones and threw down into the space between the wooden walls.

Dirt was thrown upon these layers of stone and trampled down, and then the span began to fill up slowly, but compactly.

Another hurricane injured his work a little, but he felt encouraged that no greater harm was done, and went steadily at it again.

It was nearly three months before he had his basin completed; but he felt very proud when it was done at last, and he had the satisfaction of seeing the sea defied, for, though the waters found their level within, when a storm came, they were as quiet as a millpond, no matter how wild the sea rose without.

Next he laid his keel, bracing it well, and began his boat.

He had many of the timbers and planks to cut and fit, but he worked with patience and skill, and the hull began at last to assume shape,

showing that he had started to build a vessel some thirty-five feet long by ten in beam.

There was ample sail material, rigging and spars saved from the schooner, and he stepped his mast, a spare boom of the pirate craft, as soon as he got his keel laid.

Over and over again he congratulated himself upon having taken from the schooner all its extra rigging, sails and spars, which now came in so well in the building of his vessel, for he had plenty of oakum and pitch for calking the seams.

From sunrise until sunset he worked, bappy in the thought that each day he made good progress, and counting the time when all should be finished.

The days passed into weeks, and weeks made months, until a year had gone by since the man had been cast upon that barren isle.

In all that time not a sail had he seen pass near, and he would have become desperate but for his work, which promised him escape at last.

His provisions still held out, but they were not plentiful, and he took time to fish and to shoot a bird now and then to help out his larder.

At last the craft was finished, as to her hull, and Rafael Rodriguez had the satisfaction of seeing her rise upon the waters that filled the basin when another storm came.

He had braced the hull thoroughly with ropes, ballasted it, and gave a shout of joy when he saw it float, and noted that there were but a few leaks.

These were marked from within, and when the hull settled down on a level keel upon the sand when the waters receded, they were quick-calked until not a leak was found.

The decking was then done, and next the bowsprit was put in place, the rudder following.

There was no topmast, so spars were fitted for the boom and gaff, and the measure for the sails taken.

Then the sails, jib, staysail and mainsail were made and bent, and if they did not fit to perfection, they were at least strong and served the purpose intended for them.

Rafael Rodriguez had noted that there was a reef off-shore, some three hundred feet, just opposite to his basin, and that it was a couple of cables in length.

This had proven a good breakwater, and he decided to add to its use in this respect by dumping rocks and debris upon it.

He had laid aside material for building a skiff, or small boat, as he worked on his sloop, and was not long in completing this little auxiliary.

Timbers of the wreck were towed out to the reef and anchored with chains, ropes and rocks, and then the taking down of his basin wall was begun, and the rocks were carried out and dumped upon the reef.

As the wall grew smaller the reef breakwater was enlarged, and it soon began to present a very decided barrier to the waters of the sea.

The energetic workman had noticed that storms breaking the other side of the island filled his basin, while the waters were comparatively calm between his breakwater and the land, and so he arranged to warp his vessel out during a tempest from that quarter and anchor her there.

His anchors had been made of the schooner's davits and pieces of iron, and a rude windlass had been constructed forward upon the sloop.

There was no safe anchorage around the island, except under the lee of the breakwater, should a hurricane come upon him before he could set sail.

At last a storm came, in which he was enabled to warp his vessel out of the basin, his lines being fast to the breakwater.

The anchor was let fall, and the sloop was ready for sea.

The next day the little skiff was kept busy bearing off stores to the rude, but staunch-looking sloop, and the treasure of Belmont the Buccaneer was stowed away in a safe hiding-place.

There were no compasses, nothing to tell the bold mariner which way to steer, and he would have to spread his sails and head at random for a port.

But, having accomplished so much, he was not to be discouraged, and one pleasant morning, just sixteen months after his being wrecked upon the island, he bade it farewell, set sail, got up his crude anchor, stood out from under the lee of the breakwater and was launched upon his voyage, which his pluck and energy had enabled him to start upon.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

A CRUEL FATE.

FATE seemed to be against Rafael Rodriguez, in spite of all his courage and will, for his little sloop was knocked about by the winds and waves for weeks after leaving the island.

Not a sail had the daring sailor sighted, and though islands had come into view here and there, Rodriguez saw that they were barren and uninhabited.

He had to anchor at times and thus obtain much-needed rest, and again he would have to battle for several days and nights with a storm.

Thus a month passed away and he had not yet found a vessel or a haven of refuge.

His vessel, rudely built, was slow, yet seaworthy; but it began to leak badly, and about half the time of the old skipper was spent in keeping the water down that threatened to sink him.

One night he was caught in a terrible storm, and all that he could do was to run directly before the gale.

It was black as ink around him, the waves ran fearfully high, and the winds drove the craft along under bare poles at an appalling rate of speed.

Rafael Rodriguez feared that his end was near.

The vessel was leaking rapidly, and the waves breaking over her were aiding to fill her up from the opened seams upon the deck.

Suddenly there was heard a wild roar ahead, and a wall of white gleamed up before the bows.

The man at the tiller knew that what he beheld was breakers, and he gave up all hope.

Another instant and the sloop struck with a force that seemed to knock her to pieces.

The pursuing wave seized Rafael Rodriguez upon its bosom, carried him clear of the wreck, swept him over the reef and then hurled him upon a sandy beach.

He was rolled over and over, buried and half stunned; but he made a struggle for life, checked his backward career with the retreating wave and ran rapidly beyond the wash.

Then all strength left him and he fell down upon the sands unconscious.

When he awoke the sun shone in his face.

The waves yet beat upon the island, but the winds had gone down, the storm was over, and the sea was rapidly becoming calm.

The wrecked man saw that he was upon a small island, with rocks and sand only about him.

Where he was he did not know, but he thought it was an island of the Bahamas.

He reached among the wreckage for something to eat, and managed to secure some sea-soaked food, which he gladly ate.

The strong box with the pirate's treasure in it caught his eye, and something impelled him to carry it up into the interior of the island and bury it.

He found a good spot near a group of rocks, and knew that the winds would hide it well beneath the sands.

He dried out some of the clothing from the wrecked sloop, and the sails, and made himself a shelter and a bed.

What food he could find he secured, and then sat down to await the result.

He was almost prostrated with sorrow and despair, for after a month's cruising in his little craft, he was no better off than he had been when about a year and a half before he had been driven upon the other island when in irons in the hold of the buccaneer schooner.

"My God have mercy upon me!"

"I am worse off, for then I had ample food and material to build a craft out of.

"Here I have nothing!"

He dropped his face in his hands, and for a long time remained thus.

When he again looked up his eyes fell upon an object out upon the sea.

"It is my boat!" he cried, joyfully, remembering that the little skiff had been torn from the sloop by the waves, and had doubtless been driving along in the track of the tempest.

Swimming out to it, he brought it ashore, and was glad to see that it was not damaged to any great extent.

What damage had been done he repaired the next day as best he could, and then rigged up a stump mast and spritsail for it, making a rudder as best he could from pieces of wreckage.

To remain upon the island he knew was death to him as soon as his scanty food gave out, and so he determined to start at once to try and see if he could not get in the path of trading vessels, or at least find an island where he could be better situated than where he then was.

So he set sail in the little skiff, leaving his buccaneers' treasure hidden on the island.

The third day out, and when he was beginning to despair, for he had no longer any food, and fever was seizing upon him, he sighted a distant sail.

It was nearly sunset when he was discovered by those on the vessel, for the wind was light, and as he ran alongside all strength and consciousness left him.

But he had fallen into good hands, and seeing that he was no ordinary personage the captain of the vessel had him taken into his cabin and tenderly cared for.

For weeks did Rafael Rodriguez remain in the delirium of fever; but then his strong constitution triumphed over disease and he rallied from the very brink of the grave.

When consciousness returned to him he found himself in the cabin of a large vessel, and beheld the kindly face of the captain bending over him.

"Where am I?" he asked in a whisper.

"Among good friends, sir, so do not worry," was the response.

"I am on shipboard."
 "Yes."
 "I remember now sighting a sail and heading toward it."
 "Yes, we picked you up just in time, and you seem to have had a hard time of it, for your hair and beard were down to your waist; but I had them cut off by the ship's barber, and you look like a different man."
 "How long have I been sick?"
 "Five weeks."
 "So long?"
 "Yes; but you are all right now."
 "What ship is this?"
 "The clipper ship America, out of New York and bound to China, for she is in the tea trade."
 "I am her captain and my name is Horace Withers, so do not talk any more now, but let me give you some food."
 "Bound to China? Oh! how long, how long will it be before I can return home?"
 "Do not worry, sir, or you will have a relapse."

"You are all right, and can take the first craft back home after we arrive in China, or, if I meet a vessel bound to the States, I will put you on board."
 "Now do not worry."

"I will not, sir, and I have much to thank you for," said Rafael Rodriguez, and he determined to place no barrier in the way of his rapid recovery.

As the days passed on he improved steadily, and soon told the captain his story, though he said nothing of finding the treasure of the buccaneer.

As the captain had lost one of his mates overboard, shortly after leaving New York, he was glad to accept the offer of Rafael Rodriguez, to serve in that capacity, and having been an officer of the Spanish Navy he fully understood the duties devolving upon him, while it gave him occupation for mind and body.

The clipper ship in good time reached her point of destination, but anxious to get to Spain, and from thence sail in a vessel bound to Cuba, Rafael Rodriguez determined not to return in the good vessel to New York, and so took passage in an English brig bound to Bombay.

He had with him his belt of gold about his waist, so was amply provided with funds, for when a prisoner of the pirates, by some mistake on their part he had not been searched.

Arriving in Bombay he secured a berth upon a craft bound to a Mediterranean port, and began to feel that a few more months would find him again at home, when one day a sail was sighted and the captain of the merchant vessel at once set all sail in flight.

"You seem to dread the stranger, sir?" said Rafael Rodriguez, coming on deck and addressing the captain of the vessel.

"It is an Algerine corsair, sir, and we have every reason to dread him," was the reply.

The fearless, handsome face of the young Cuban turned pale at this, for well he knew how much cause for dread there was, and he seemed to feel that a cruel fate might still be dogging his steps.

"My God! after nearly two long years of anguish, sufferings and struggling, will I again be doomed to misery upon almost the threshold of triumph?" he said to himself as he turned his gaze upon the distant sail, which was now in full chase of the brigantine.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

THE CHASE.

The vessel in which Raphael Rodriguez had taken passage from Bombay, was an English brig, bound to ports in the Mediterranean with a valuable cargo.

She was a stanch craft, and withal a fleet sailer, while her captain was a bluff Englishman, brave and skillful.

Her crew consisted of some thirty men, all told, and she carried two fair-sized guns as a protection.

But, fleet as she was, she was not enough so to outfoot the vessel in chase of her, and if, as the captain surmised, it was an Algerine corsair, her two guns and thirty men, even with the aid of Rafael Rodriguez and half a dozen other passengers, would prove no match against the outlaw with his heavy guns and large crew.

Taking a glass, Rafael Rodriguez gazed fixedly at the stranger.

After awhile he said:

"Captain, I think you are right, for that looks to me very like an Algerine, and I have cruised much in these waters when an officer in the Spanish Navy, so have had experience with those fellows."

"My dear sir, why did you not before tell me that you were a sailor and an officer, and may I ask you to aid me now, for while I look to the sailing of the craft will you organize the crew to defend the vessel, for I shall fight to the last."

"I will gladly aid you, sir," was the response of the young Cuban, and he at once set to work to prepare to defend the ship against any odds they might have to meet.

The male passengers were called upon to help, and they were distributed among the crew.

The guns were double-shotted, small-arms brought on deck and loaded, and all preparations made that could be of the slightest use in beating off the foe.

The captain had in the meantime put every stitch of canvas on the brig that would draw a pound, and had noted that though his vessel was sailing splendidly, the pursuer still gained perceptibly.

It was unfortunately in the morning, and all longed for night, and a blow, which would give the brig an opportunity to escape.

The pursuer was certainly an odd-looking craft, with its long, low hull and lateen sails.

It had set all the canvas that would draw, and was striving hard to capture the prize.

No colors were displayed upon it, but that it was a corsair no one doubted.

The decks were seen to be crowded with men, and a heavy battery was discerned with the glass from the brig.

"We will have a heavy battery to contend against, and he must carry fully eighty men," said Rafael Rodriguez, addressing the captain of the brig as the two stood watching the pursuer.

"It will be a desperate fight, sir, but then we must not yield, as captivity by those accursed Algerines is far worse than death," replied the brave old captain.

"I can well believe that, sir, and if our crew and passengers support us, we may be able to beat them off."

"I have told them all what they have to expect if we are taken."

"I thank you, Mr. Rodriguez, and I rely much upon your aid, sir," the captain said.

Then the two watched in silence the sailing of the brig, and the coming after her of the pursuer.

The latter still gained, though slowly; but he was coming on at a pace that would bring him within hail before nightfall.

When but a mile separated the two vessels a puff of smoke burst from the bows of the pursuer, and a shot came flying over the decks of the brig.

At the same time the flag of Algiers went up over the decks of the corsair, fluttering out defiantly from the peak of the lateen mizzen sail.

"It is as I feared," said the English captain, and he did not flinch as the well-aimed shot from the corsair tore through the bulwarks and cut down an unfortunate sailor.

"Yes, and we must fight to the bitter end," replied Rafael Rodriguez.

As the brig did not come to at the brazen demand of the corsair, other shots were fired and with more or less damage.

Still the brig held on, and in silence.

Rafael Rodriguez would not use his guns until they could be of the greatest service.

The corsair seemed in deadly earnest, and unheeding the red ensign of Great Britain, flying from the peak of the brig, kept up a hot fire upon her.

Now and then a shot would tell with damaging force, and the decks of the brig already had several dead and wounded men upon them, cut down from a crew that was small enough at best.

And having gained a better wind the corsair came along at a more rapid pace, and all on board the English vessel felt that the death-struggle must soon begin.

Not a soul was there who dreamed of surrender, for each one knew that the Algerine and Moorish corsairs never gave mercy, and if taken prisoners their death would be preferable to the misery they would know for the rest of their lives.

Deeply did Rafael Rodriguez feel his situation.

He seemed to feel that he had been cut out for misfortune.

In early life he had possessed riches and won fame in the navy of Spain.

He had loved but one woman, Victorine, and she had become his wife.

Then misfortune had dogged his steps, for he had been wounded nigh unto death in his duel with Belmont the Buccaneer, had been captured with his wife and child, torn

from them and put in irons in the hold of the pirate schooner, had been wrecked, and, after long trial had escaped from his island imprisonment to be again wrecked, picked up at sea and nearly died of brain fever.

Carried to far away China he was struggling to get back to those whom he loved, to the old home in Cuba, when now a more desperate danger threatened him after his two years of sorrow and sufferings.

He was however schooled to bear all bravely, and he nerved himself to what was before him, and stood calmly awaiting the ordeal of blood that must now be upon them.

CHAPTER XXXV.

THE CUBAN AT BAY.

NEARER and nearer approached the Algerine corsair, for the cruisers of Algiers and Morocco at that date were nothing more than pirate craft, waging war upon the commerce of the world.

In a short while the battle must begin for life and death.

"As we are only cut up by running, sir, suppose we put about and strike back as best we can?" said Rafael Rodriguez, addressing the captain of the brig, when he realized that they could not harm the Algerine until at close quarters.

"I was just about to ask you what you thought of doing so, Mr. Rodriguez, and I am glad that you are of the same opinion."

"I will give the order at once."

The order was given, the brig wore around, and, as she did so Rafael fired a double charged gun.

The result was all that could be desired, for it struck the cruiser in the bows, tore along the crowded decks and dropped a number of the crew.

Again the gun was loaded and fired, the brig, at the suggestion of the Cuban, standing in a course that enabled him to bring the piece to bear upon the enemy.

Rafael Rodriguez aimed the gun himself, and, as before, the shot was a deadly one.

The corsair was now quite close at hand, and coming down to board; but the brig's small arms opened, with her heavy gun, and the damage to the Algerine was seen to be severe.

But the course of the corsair was not changed, nor was his intention checked, which was to board as soon as possible and crush by numbers what he could not do with his guns.

"If we had half a dozen guns I believe we could beat him off," said Rafael.

"If you aimed each gun, sir."

"But let us stand ready to meet him, for he is almost aboard?"

The next moment there came stern orders in a loud, unknown tongue, and the Algerine splendidly handled was laid alongside the brig.

The shock was terrific, and the sides of the brig were stove in, while the corsair seemed unhurt.

Then the hand-to-hand combat was begun with fearful ferocity and death-wounds were both given and taken.

Rafael Rodriguez saw that the English captain fell and he at once took command, striving to force the corsairs overboard.

For a moment he seemed triumphant, for he drove them to their own decks, and followed promptly, for he knew that the brig was going down rapidly.

There was no time to delay, and the order of the corsair chief came to cast off the grapnels.

It was obeyed just in time, for with a forward plunge the brig went down, while the shrieks of the wounded upon her decks, and the few women and children on board, were hushed by the merciless waves.

A moment of silence and inaction followed.

Rafael Rodriguez and a score of men, armed and desperate, stood upon the stern of the corsair craft, while the Algerines, three-score in number, confronted them, their fierce chief at their head.

As the flag of the brig disappeared from sight beneath the waves, Rafael Rodriguez cried out in a voice heard by all:

"Follow me!"

"Hurl the devils overboard, lads, and the craft is ours!"

They were brave words and well intended,

and the men dashed after their young leader with a rush that was irresistible.

But they were outnumbered three to one, and the corsairs were the victors of a hundred red fights.

Driven back at first, the Algerines rallied, and began to press the Englishmen savagely.

Down went several of the corsairs under the cutlass blows of the Cuban, and then he stood face to face with the corsair captain.

Suddenly an idea seized the Cuban.

It was a forlorn hope, but he would attempt it.

He saw that his men were not more than fifteen in number, and that the Algerines were over half a hundred.

His men were grouped together aft, desperate and at bay.

The Algerines were aft of amidships and ready for a rush.

Rafael had noted that every look and word of their chief was obeyed, and as the bold corsair sprung forward to face him, he acted.

He struck up the blade of the corsair captain, grasped him in his powerful arms, and in an instant had hurled him to the deck upon his back.

Placing his foot upon the breast of the Algerine, Rafael Rodriguez cried in thunder tones, as he held his cutlass-point at the throat of his foe:

"Back, you corsair dogs, or I kill your chief!"

There was a wild cry of alarm from the corsairs, while the brig's crew, astounded at the bold act of the Cuban sailor at once gained courage.

"Order your men back, Sir Corsair, or I kill you as I would a dog," cried Rafael Rodriguez, in Spanish, which he knew nearly all of the Algerines understood, and many spoke.

The corsair captain was astounded.

He was also terrified, so suddenly had he been brought face to face with a master.

He knew that a desperate man held a cutlass-point at his throat.

What should he do?

"It would be certain death to refuse; but what then?"

He must gain time and see, so he gave the order:

"Fall back, Algerines!"

The men sullenly obeyed, and a cheer of defiance broke from the Englishmen, and they grasped their weapons more firmly and began to reload their pistols.

But the corsairs also reloaded their weapons, while they awaited the result.

"Well, what would you?" asked the chief.

"I would save my life and the lives of these brave men."

"How can you?" and the corsair chief spoke in good Spanish.

"Your men must be ordered into the hold forward, and there remain until we reach your shores, where I will land you all."

"If you require I will kill you and then fight it out with your crew to the death."

"What say you, Senor Corsair?"

"I am at your mercy, and life is dear to all."

"I submit."

Such were the words of the chief, when from one of his men broke forth the ringing cry in the Algerine tongue:

"Sail ho!"

CHAPTER XXXVI.

THE CAPTIVE.

WITH the cry of the Algerine sailor, the corsair chief called out in his own tongue, which the Cuban knew enough of from having served in the Mediterranean, to understand what was said:

"What is the sail?" the chief asked.

"A sister craft, Chief Mezrak, the cruiser *El Rais*!" was the reply of the sailor.

The yell of exultation that broke from the corsairs told that they felt that the triumph was now with them.

The Englishmen cast a hasty glance out over the waters and beheld a vessel, the counterpart of the corsair craft, but a short distance away.

To escape her was out of the question.

The Algerine colors were at the peak of her lateen yard, and her men were at their guns.

She had been unobserved in the excitement of the chase and battle between the corsair and the brig.

Had he a larger crew, Rafael Rodriguez would have hurried the corsairs into the hold under penalty of the instant death of their chief, and fought him.

But he knew that the tables were turned against him.

But he determined to gain what terms he could.

So he said sternly:

"Aid is coming to you, Senor Corsair; but before it reaches here, if you do not grant my demand you shall die."

"What demand make you?" asked the corsair chief.

"That you pledge your word, in the name of Allah, to spare the lives of my men and myself."

"Do you mean to set you free?"

"Yes, you have sunk our vessel, destroyed our property, killed many of our friends, and should do so."

"I will pledge my word to spare your lives dogs of Christians that you are; but your freedom or captivity I shall leave to my brother, Captain *El Rais*."

Rafael Rodriguez saw that he could get no better terms.

Life was better than death, he felt all would agree, and as captives they might escape or be rescued.

So he said:

"I agree to it then, that, in the name of Allah, you spare our lives."

"Is it so?"

"Yes."

"Then rise!" and removing his foot and the cutlass point from the corsair's throat, the Cuban stepped back.

The Algerine chief rose slowly.

He was evidently in ill-humor, and he glanced across the waters toward the craft to whose coming he owed his rescue.

He saw that it was within a few cables' length, with her men at their guns, and running down to board him, her captain realizing that there was some trouble on board of his vessel.

The crew of the corsair stood silent and sullen, awaiting the result, and with eyes fixed alternately upon their chief and the approaching vessel.

The Englishmen had heard what had passed between the Cuban and the corsair.

They knew that he could do no more, and they were glad that at least their lives were safe.

Then the corsair chief hailed the other Algerine cruiser, and bade *El Rais* come on board.

The craft luffed up, a boat was lowered, and the captain with a dozen armed men boarded the corsair.

In a few words he was told all that had happened, and he regarded Rafael Rodriguez with considerable admiration.

He ranked the captain which had fought the brig, and said:

"As you vowed in the name of Allah to spare their lives, so shall it be."

"Keep the men on your vessel to man the sweeps, and I will take that bold leader, for his courage is remarkable."

"He is a sailor and I need a sub-officer."

"I will take them back with me."

There was nothing more to be said, for *El Rais* was the ranking officer, and half an hour after Rafael Rodriguez found himself in an Algerine dress on board a corsair vessel, compelled to act as an under officer, which in fact was little better than a slave's position.

He had bidden a sad farewell to his fellow unfortunates, and the two vessels separated, each going in a different direction to seek other victims.

After a cruise of several months the craft in which Rafael Rodriguez was a captive, ran into the port of Algiers and he learned that a British war-ship had captured the vessel on which his friends had been held as prisoners.

"Oh, that I had been on that craft," he murmured.

But he did not despair, and tried to gain the confidence of his chief by doing all duties devolving upon him faithfully.

The chief of the craft held high rank ashore, as well as afloat.

He spoke English and Spanish fairly well, and seemed to be one to admire courage, even in a foe.

The story told of the Cuban's desperate defense of his vessel, for he deemed him the captain, had won his admiration, and he was glad to take him with him as an under officer, knowing that he could be most useful to him.

But Rafael was watched all the time, and he knew it.

Still he did not get despondent, and hoped that some day an opportunity would come when he could escape.

He studied the language diligently, and soon spoke it fluently, while his darkly-bronzed face and dress caused him to look very much like an Algerine.

"Some day my chance will come," he said to himself over and over again, and he watched for the chance by day and night.

But after over a year passed on board the Algerine corsair, in which he was a participant in many a red encounter, and merciless scene, he had not found the chance he longed for.

He had just determined that he would become one of the creed of those whom he was forced to serve, excusing himself by the thought that his sufferings, and his duty to his wife and child demanded any sacrifice.

As a Mohammedan he felt that he would be treated with less suspicion, and having studied every accent of the language, having learned to speak it as fluently as a native, he did not doubt but that he could desert the ship when in port and make his escape.

But a cruel fate seemed still to dog his steps, as, just as he had made up his mind to what course he would pursue, his captain was killed in combat, and the *Sota Rais*,* never friendly to him, upon reaching port ordered him to be sold along with a number of the slaves of *El Rais*.

This was a death-blow to Rafael Rodriguez, as he knew that he was to be taken far into the interior of the country and become a slave to the cruel master who had purchased him.

And his worst fears were realized, for his master started for the interior the next day, and Rafael Rodriguez became a slave in its worst form of a desert sheik, where any hope of escape seemed forever cut off from him.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

CONRAD THE CONVICT.

LEAVING the wretched man, Rafael Rodriguez, against whom Fate had turned most cruelly, a captive to a desert sheik in Africa, plotting, planning, almost despairing, and yet hoping, I will now ask my reader to return with me to America.

There another football of Fate, an Ocean Tramp as it were, was incarcerated in the stone walls of a prison.

Carlos Conrad, an American, and yet one who had become a pirate, the friend of Belmont the Buccaneer, and his lieutenant, had been brought to a stop in his life of crime from having slain the sailor in the boat that night in New York Harbor.

No body had been found, for the tide had swept the murdered man far out to sea; but circumstantial evidence was against him and he was sentenced to life-long imprisonment.

Carlos Conrad was a man of indomitable nerve and courage.

He did not grow despondent upon entering the prison walls, but at once his brain became busy with plotting to escape.

He accepted the situation as it was, appearing almost cheerful, and soon won the good will of his keepers.

Whatever the task given him to perform, he did it without a murmur, and did it well.

He was never repressed, for he was prompt to obey, neat in his dress, spoke only when spoken to, and then answered cheerfully.

His past life seemed to be obliterated from his memory, and yet in the gloom of his cell, by night, when all was silent, save the clanking of chains as his fellow convicts moved uneasily in their sleep, tortured by dreams,

* Lieutenant.

there must have come to him bitter remorse for his crimes in the bygone.

So the days went by until the calendar of Time told off months of imprisonment.

Years followed, and still no chance had come for the prisoner to escape.

He was "in for life," and so was closely watched.

If his keepers relaxed their watchfulness, it was when his cell door barred him within.

Time was passing, and without the world was changing; but Carlos Conrad had vowed to see that world again, to mingle with it, to once more sail the seas, to become an Ocean Tramp as of old, and he had vowed to keep his pledge, making it doubly strong.

There was work for him to do.

Belmont the Buccaneer was unavenged.

His slayer lived in luxury, where from his elegant home he could look down upon the tomb which he (Conrad) had erected over the ashes of the buccaneer.

His slayer, as he put it, lived with his wife and his pretended child in a grand old home, with all that money could buy about him.

He must suffer for the hanging of Belmont the Buccaneer at the yard-arm!

This must be done; his vow to avenge must be kept; but to keep it, he must first get out of prison.

He must leave the prison which was a living tomb to him.

But iron and stone could not be easily moved, and the watchful eyes of the guards could not be avoided.

One night loud cries rung through the stone corridors and awakened Carlos Conrad from sleep.

A fellow-convict was ill, raving in delirium, and keepers and the surgeon were with him, trying to quiet his wild fancies of the brain, founded upon the crimes he had been guilty of.

The next morning the poor wretch was dead, and his body was hurried out of the cell into the grave.

But Carlos Conrad had risen, as the ravings fell upon his ears, and he had noted several things which he jotted down to make use of.

Several days after, "Number 500," as Carlos Conrad was called, was found to be quite sick.

He had fever, and he seemed to suffer intensely.

The surgeon was called, and prescribed for him, but the patient grew worse.

He seemed to lie in a comatose state, only now and then rousing up into frenzy.

He ate nothing, and did not recognize his keepers.

Days passed, and still the sick convict grew no better.

He was wasting away, and the keepers said:

"Yes, he is in for life; he will die soon, and never leave his cell alive."

A nurse was kept with him by day and night, to be ready to calm his frenzied attacks, which seized upon him once or twice every twenty-four hours.

With a helpless invalid, as it were, the iron door was not closed, and the nurse would pace up and down the corridor, while the patient rested quietly.

A groan from the invalid brought the nurse to his side.

All was still in the prison, excepting now and then the heavy breathing of a prisoner, or a groan of remorse in sleep, from some poor wretch who was living over in a nightmare the deed he had done, and which had brought him there.

The nurse bent low over the convict patient, to see if his end was approaching, for he was deemed to be very ill.

Suddenly the arms of Carlos Conrad went up, and one encircled the body of the nurse, the other clutched at the throat with a grip that was deadly.

The nurse felt that he was in the grasp of a maniac, for he believed the convict in one of his frenzies.

He tried to break loose, tried to call for help.

But both were useless and he grew black in the face, his strength left him and he lay limp and helpless upon the bed.

Then the convict arose, with an agility that was surprising in a sick man.

He quickly gagged and bound the helpless nurse, after having changed clothing with him.

The nurse was placed on the cot, and covered up, and, attired in the clothing of his victim, he drew his hat down over his eyes, and left the cell.

Down the corridor he went with easy tread, and meeting the guard said calmly:

"Number 500 is dying I think, and I am going for the surgeon."

The light was dim, and the guard could hardly see the face of the speaker.

"Poor fellow, his sentence did not last long as I expected, for prison life broke his heart."

"That man is a born gentleman, Buckstone."

"Yes," was the reply as the convict hastened on along the corridor, so dimly lighted.

In his ten long years of prison life, Carlos Conrad had learned the place thoroughly, every nook and cranny had been mapped upon his memory.

He had asked questions of convicts who had had an opportunity to know, about the inner workings of the prison, and he was aware that he would have a door to pass into an ante-room.

There was always a man on duty there, and he might find a comrade with him, perhaps more.

But the chances were that he would find him alone.

He would knock at the door, a slide would open, and the guard would ask his business, and, if all was right, admit him.

If more were in the room he must face them.

Across the room was a door leading into a small hall, and from there there were the massive iron doors that led out of the prison to freedom.

Once out of that door was a small yard, with a board fence, and a gate in it that was locked.

But the key was kept in the office or ante-room, and was carried out by the guard when a ring at the gate-bell told him that some one wanted admission.

To get the surgeon he would have to go to this office and report to the guard, who would pull a cord connecting with a bell in the room of that prison functionary.

The surgeon would report at the office and be told to go to the cell where he was needed.

With all these forms and dangers to go through, the chances were that Carlos Conrad would fail in his attempt to escape.

But he had plotted well, and at last had made the bold attempt, after ten long years of prison life.

If he failed, then he must bear the punishment.

With this knowledge in his heart he walked boldly up to the iron door at the end of the corridor and rapped on the little slide to call the guard to him.

CHAPTER XXXVIII: THE CONVICT'S ORDEAL.

WHEN Carlos Conrad tapped upon the slide in the iron door he was perfectly calm.

Had he been visiting a friend and knocking at his door for admission he could not have appeared more unmoved outwardly.

What was ringing in his heart and brain was however a different matter.

He was a prisoner for life, freedom was before him, death behind him.

The tap on the slide brought the sound of a step upon a stone pavement beyond the door, and the next instant with a click, there appeared a square opening level with the face of the convict.

A larger man than the nurse who lay bound on his cot in the cell, Carlos Conrad was, at a glance, not unlike him.

A second, closer look however, would have revealed a vast difference.

Holding his face in shadow, and imitating the low voice of the nurse, the convict said, addressing the guard by name, for he knew him:

"Bristow, Number 500 is in a bad way and I must get more medicine from the surgeon."

The convict had cast a hasty glance into the room.

The guard alone appeared to be there, for it was after midnight.

"All right," was the reply, and the slide closed.

Then there was heard the turning of a key in a lock and the unbolting of the door.

The guard then drew the door open and keeping his face turned aside, the convict entered the office.

Quickly the guard closed the door behind him, without a glance at the pretended nurse, while he said:

"If you only want medicine, Buckstone, you had better go up after it and not make the surgeon come down, for he's been worked hard of late."

As the guard spoke he had locked and bolted the door.

Then as he turned, he received a stunning blow under the ear.

He would have fallen had not the convict seized him and let him down gently.

The blow had been a severe one, as Carlos Conrad intended it should be.

Quickly he stepped to a rack, upon which hung a number of manacles, and slipped them upon the hands and feet of the guard.

To gag him securely was the work of another minute, and then, glancing over a board on which hung a number of keys, with the names of the doors they belonged to written above them, he secured the one of the outer portal, and next took down that which opened the gate.

The arms of the guard were appropriated, with a cloak that lay upon a sofa, and the convict then crossed the room to the door which opened into the hallway.

He took the key out of the lock, and securely locked the door after he had passed through.

A dim light burned in the hall, and a pair of stone steps led to the rooms of the prison officers above.

The bar on the outer door was then removed, the key turned in the lock, and out into the free air stepped the bold convict.

But he had yet the gate to pass through.

A walk of forty paces brought him to the gate, and this too was unlocked with the key which he had taken.

Locking the gate behind him, he thrust the key into his pocket and stepped out into the highway.

Not far from him was the river, and the road he was upon ran toward the city some distance away.

A moment he stood in silent meditation, as though undecided what to do.

Then he turned toward the huge prison, whose gloomy walls he had just left.

"For ten long years to-night, I have dwelt within that living tomb."

"But now I am free, free as the bird that flies."

"I starved myself for days to accomplish this, and I feigned frenzy and illness."

"I played my part well, for it gained me my freedom; but they found I had not lost my strength, I guess, when I got them with in my grip."

"Well, I am free, but penniless, and weak from long fasting."

"Still, my freedom gives me strength and I will find a means of evading all pursuit."

"Ten long years! Oh! how fearful the memory of those years."

Then, wheeling on his heel, he started off at a rapid walk; but a moment after he turned, and looking back at the gloomy walls, shook his fist at them and said between his shut teeth:

"Curses upon you!"

Again he walked on, and soon the highway bordered the edge of the river.

A country seat was not far away, and before it was a small pleasure-craft at anchor, with a number of row-boats drawn half out upon the shore.

One of them he shoved into the water, and springing into it, seized the oars and pulled rapidly away.

His eyes fell upon a vessel coming toward him.

It was evidently just from the town, and was without doubt bound upon a voyage, perhaps to some distant land.

"It will take me far from here," he said, and he pulled rapidly out to cross its course.

Soon the vessel was near at hand, and a voice hailed.

But the convict made no reply.

Again came the hail:

"Boat ahoy! pull out of our course, or we will run you down!"

But the boat remained motionless upon the waters.

Then came the order to luff sharp, and as the vessel, which was a large barque, did so, the bows just missed the boat, and a feeble voice called out:

"Help me!"

The barque went up into the wind and lay to, and a boat was lowered and pulled to the one which had been so nearly run down.

They found in it a man who could hardly speak, and he was at once taken on board.

The captain of the barque heard his story, told almost in a whisper, of how he had been robbed, while a passenger upon a coasting schooner, and then set adrift in the boat in the face of a storm.

With no food or water he had suffered greatly, and so had drifted about the sea until he had strength to row into the course of the vessel and no more.

His face was deathly white, after his long confinement in prison, his eyes were sunken and a haggard look aided in showing that he had suffered.

No one doubted his story, and the captain told him to make the voyage with him as his guest, and the invitation was gladly accepted.

The barque was bound to Havana, and so it was that Conrad, the convict, left the shores of America behind him after ten long years spent behind iron bars.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

A PIRATE'S RETROSPECTION.

CARLOS CONRAD landed from the barque, upon his arrival in Havana, and sought the tavern where he had stopped with Belmont the Buccaneer long years before.

But ten years bring many changes, and upon asking for the landlord of the place he found that he had been long dead, and more, he had been discovered as an agent for pirates, and his taking off had been by process of law.

What to do then, Carlos Conrad did not know.

He dared not return to New York just then in the barque, though the captain had offered him a berth back again.

He had it in his power to change his career there and there.

He could ship on some vessel as a sailor, and he knew that his ability would soon cause him to rise up the scale to a mate's berth, and perhaps a captain's.

He thought of his old home, his stern father, his loving mother, a fond little sister, and wondered if they were all dead.

The more he thought of them, the more came over him a feeling to lead an honest life.

He had not been to Baltimore since his father had struck him and driven him from his home, when he was a boy, a score of years before.

He at last made up his mind to return and see what had become of those whom he had loved.

The want of money did not prompt him to this course, only the wish to visit his old home.

Having decided to return, he went down to the wharves and looked out for a vessel bound to Baltimore.

To his great delight he found one about to sail, and very willing to ship a good hand.

So, as a foremast hand he shipped, and the ship turned her prow seaward a few hours after.

It was dawn when the vessel dropped anchor in the harbor, and receiving his wages, all that he possessed in the world, and not enough to keep him two weeks, he went ashore.

Changes, many of them, had come upon the town since his boyhood days; but he remembered the streets, and made his way out the Catonsville road, on which had been situated the country seat of his father.

He went by the old shipping office first, and saw another name above the door.

"Where have the shippers Conrad & Co. moved, please tell me?" he asked an old drayman.

"Lordy, my lad, the old man moved to

Heaven, I hope, fifteen years ago, and the firm is no more."

"And his family?" asked Carlos Conrad.

"The old lady went South to live with her daughter, who married a Louisiana planter, I heard."

"And the old Conrad home?"

"Was sold, long ago. But you must be a stranger here?"

"I am, but I knew the family years ago, and being in port, thought I'd look them up."

"The old man is in the cemetery, as I told you, and his wife and daughter have gone South."

"Thank you, my man," and so saying Carlos Conrad, with his heart swelling with emotion, went out to see the old home.

There it was, with little changes without, though others dwelt within.

There was the long piazza, the trees beneath which he had so often played as a boy, and his heart was almost bursting as he gazed upon the old, familiar scenes.

Wiping a tear from his eye, the first he had shed in many a long year, he turned from the old home and wended his way toward the cemetery.

He knew the family lot well, there having been buried his grandparents and a baby brother.

Above his father's ashes had been erected a costly tomb.

No tear came to his eye as he stood there and read the tribute to the old merchant's virtues.

But he stood with uncovered head, and upon his face rested a strange look.

"Father, may Heaven forgive you for driving me from you, and from those I loved."

"I may have done wrong in setting free that man—I doubtless did—and much sorrow and suffering would have been saved to many had I left him to his fate."

"But my heart was tortured at his fearful fate, and I let him go."

"It was cruel in you to strike me down, to kick me, to drive me from you, and it has made me what I am."

"I tried to be honest, tried to lead a life that would bring me a name won by my own exertions; but I have been the football of a cruel fate, and I was guided by a strange destiny into the power of the man I had saved years before."

"Thus it was that I became what I am, a mere wanderer over the world, an Ocean Tramp, yes, a pirate, for I have been such, yes and a convict."

"Rest in your grave in peace, father, and again I say may Heaven forgive you for driving me from you twenty long years ago."

He stood for a moment in silence after musing thus aloud, and then turned and walked back toward the town, just as the shadows of evening began to fall.

Two days after he shipped before the mast upon a vessel bound to New Orleans.

He still held to his resolution to try and lead a life of honor henceforth, and, having obtained the address of his sister's home on the Mississippi River, he was determined to visit her, and his mother, to see them even if he did not make himself known to them.

CHAPTER XL.

A FOOTBALL OF FATE.

UPON the banks of the Mississippi River, not very far from the city of New Orleans, a man sat upon a rustic seat regarding the view spread out before him.

The sun was not very far from the western horizon, and the clouds were piled up in crimson and golden glory, presenting a beautiful picture to the eyes of the beholder, who gazed at them as though striving to look into the further beyond.

The face of the man was refined, that of one reared a gentleman, and his whole appearance indicated good breeding and one who was well to do in this world's goods.

But the face, once handsome, was wan, haggard and stamped with suffering.

Disease had made deep inroads upon his once powerful form, and the seal had been set upon his brow that his days were but few.

Behind him stretched a lawn, level as a

floor, and dotted here and there with majestic live-oak trees.

A gravel walk led from the rustic seat back to a white villa, hidden among orange trees, and in the distance were spacious out-houses and the quarters of the slaves.

A carriage drive wound along the river-bank behind the levee, and led to the city a few leagues distant.

The rustic seat, sheltered by a bower, was upon the levee, from whence a view of the river could be obtained for miles in each direction.

Suddenly coming along the highway appeared a man, walking at a quick pace.

He was dressed in sailor garb, and carried a stick over his shoulder, with a small carpet-bag swung upon it.

The eyes of the invalid fell upon the stranger, and he called out as he drew near:

"Well, my friend, what news is there in the town?"

The sailor glanced up and approached the other, saluting politely while he answered:

"Little news that I know of, sir, other than that I have just returned from a long voyage and am going home by foot."

"Do you live far from here?"

"Yes, sir, quite far."

"Then you had better accept my hospitality for the night, my friend, for I would be glad of your company, as I am all alone."

"You live here, sir?"

"Yes, this is my home; but it may not long be, for, as you see I am a sick man."

"You do not look just well, sir; but I hope there are many years left to you."

"Is this Mr. Esmond, for I was told by a negro back down the road that this was the Esmond Plantation?"

"Yes, I am Andrew Esmond, and who is it that I am to entertain as my guest to-night, for I beg you to remain as the sun is near its setting now?"

"My name is Carl Conrado, sir."

"A Spanish name; but you speak English perfectly."

"Yes, sir."

"And somehow your face comes back to me as one I have seen long ago."

"A fancied resemblance, sir."

"Yes, but a striking one, though the one you remind me of was a boy then."

"We were boys together, twenty years ago, and the best of friends; but he was turned away from home one day by his father, who was a cold-hearted, stern man, and as he was never heard of again, he doubtless met his death in some way."

"You must have been a true friend, sir, to have remembered him these many years."

"I was his friend, and would like to see him."

"In fact, I married his sister Cora, and she, poor girl, followed her mother to the grave a few years ago."

"Fate has been cruel to me, sir, in taking away those I loved—But are you ill, sir?"

His listener had dropped his stick and bundle, and turned very pale.

"Dead! both dead! all dead—father, mother, sister!"

The words issued from his lips as though he thought aloud.

But as they fell upon the ears of Andrew Esmond, he sprang forward and grasped the hands of the stranger, while he cried:

"Carlos Conrad, I know you now!"

"You are my boyhood friend, and the resemblance is real—you are Carlos!"

For a moment, Carlos Conrad did not speak.

Then he said, in a voice that quivered:

"Andrew, I am Carlos Conrad, and I find you the same noble friend you were twenty years ago."

"God bless you, Carlos! I am happy to see you once more."

"I come poor and friendless, Andrew, and—"

"And I am a rich man, so do not talk of being poor, for more than half of my riches I got through my marriage with your sister Cora."

"Sit down here, dear old Carlos, and tell me of yourself, for it gives me new life to see you again."

"My story is soon told, Andrew, for, after father drove me from home, I enlisted in the navy, was captured by pirates, and afterward drifted about the seas, a thorough Ocean Tramp, until at last, penniless, as most

sailors are, and seeing no chance ahead to gain riches, I followed the longing of years and went to my old home.

"Others lived there, the old firm was broken up, my father lay in the cemetery, and I determined to come here and see my mother, sister and you.

"I was poor, and did not intend to make myself known, for I was ashamed, after all these years, to be what I am.

"I only meant to see you all and then depart.

"So, when I landed in New Orleans a day ago, I set out to come here, intending to ask shelter for the night, that I might see you all.

"Thus my story is told, Andrew, and you gave me welcome, as I knew you would; but it cuts me deep into the heart to know that my mother and sister are no more."

Andrew Esmond was deeply moved by the story of the man who had called himself an Ocean Tramp.

At first he could hardly reply; but then he said:

"Some years ago my health began to fail, Carlos, and we came here to live, for an uncle had left me this plantation.

"Your mother had never ceased to mourn for you, and I felt also that she could not last long, for it was a breaking heart that ailed her.

"I began to improve, and got well once more; but your mother failed slowly and died a year ago.

"Not long after, your sister was thrown from her horse, and so seriously injured that she died soon after, and I was left alone, for we have no children.

"I felt the shock keenly, Carlos, and it soon began to undermine my health once more.

"I went North to see if it would improve me, but finding that I was growing worse, returned home to get my affairs in order ere I died.

"I have no heir, and your sister left all she possessed to me, so that my fortune is considerable.

"I had determined to leave my all to charity; but, thank Heaven, you, the rightful heir, have come in time, and you shall have all.

"Yes, Carlos, you are to remain here with me, and when I die this home and all shall be yours.

"Come, let us go into the house, for the night air chills me."

They walked together toward the handsome villa, and that night the penniless Sea Tramp slept beneath a roof, which a look into the face of Andrew Esmond told him would soon be his own.

"Fate smiles more kindly upon me now," he said grimly, as he awoke the next morning and remembered where he was.

CHAPTER XLI.

THE CONVICT HEIR.

MONTHS passed away in the plantation house upon the banks of the Mississippi.

Andrew Esmond seemed to have gotten a new lease of life, through the coming of his brother-in-law, Carlos Conrad, and he almost hoped that the cup of Death might be taken from his lips.

The two were always together, and the neighboring planters were wont to say that they were as devoted as two lovers.

Carlos Conrad had driven down to the city the day after his arrival, and, with a purse well filled by Andrew Esmond, had purchased a good wardrobe and all that he needed.

His coming was explained by the planter stating that his brother had been a ship's captain, cruising in foreign seas, and that he had sent for him, when his health began to fail, for to him was to be left the fortune that he possessed.

But his generous nature would not allow him to say that his brother-in-law was a poor man.

The handsome face of the ex-convict, again darkly bronzed by long exposure to the winds, and his splendid form won the admiration of many of the pretty girls dwelling near the Esmond Plantation, and the envy of the young planters.

"You can have your choice, Carlos," said Andrew Esmond to him one day.

"All of the girls are in love with you," he continued.

Carlos Conrad made no reply.

"How strange it is that you have never married, Carlos."

"I never loved, I suppose," was the reply, and as he spoke the thoughts of the man went back to the Senora Victorine, whose beautiful face had so impressed him.

But that he had been thrown into prison, it will be remembered, he would have gone to the home of Commodore Sprague, avenged his chief, Belmont the Buccaneer, and sought to have made his lovely widow his wife.

Her face had impressed him more than any woman's he had ever seen.

"Well, Carlos, there is time enough, for you are still under forty and a very handsome man.

"In fact, you do not look your age, though at times, when I have studied your face when you were lost in thought, I have seen you look older—yes, and as though life had been cruel to you."

"I have been cruel to myself, perhaps, Andrew; but tell me, do you love Lulu Vance?"

"Ah, Carlos, I do, with all my heart; but I would never ask her to marry me whose days are numbered," was the sad reply.

"And she loves you?"

"She has ever been good to me, and she is a noble girl, Carlos; but I do not believe she loves me, or if she did, she changed when she met you, for she knew her heart better.

"She is rich and, I think, the most lovely girl of all the planters' daughters in our set."

"She is very beautiful, Andrew," was the reply.

Soon after, Andrew Esmond remarked:

"Carlos, do you know that but for your coming I would surely have died last fall?"

"But you built me up, and here I have rallied and lived nearly a year longer; but this winter will end my days."

"Don't talk so, Andrew."

"It is true, for I know well about my condition.

"I have these hemorrhages often now, and they are more severe; but the other day I had my lawyer up here, while you had gone hunting, and my will was made in your favor, so all is yours.

"After I have gone, Carlos, I hope you will remain here, and no longer be a wanderer.

"Marry Lulu Vance, for I believe she loves you, and settle down to the life of an honored Benedict."

The days passed on until October came, and its first chill winds made a change in the invalid for the worse.

He ceased to go out upon the piazza, and kept to his room.

Then he grew weaker and remained in bed, and one night he called Carlos Conrad to his side, and said:

"The end is near, Carlos.

"I shall soon rest beside my loved wife, and my sufferings will be at an end.

"But for you I would have given up long ago; yet I am ready now to join the great majority."

He ceased speaking and for a long time neither spoke.

Then Carlos Conrad said:

"Andrew, there is no denying the truth of your words, for I have seen you failing rapidly of late, and, with you, I believe your life is nearing its end.

"But, Andrew, never met I a man who was more ready to rest from his labors than you are.

"Your life has been a blameless one, your noble name has never been sullied by act of yours, and this moment would I suffer any sorrow and pain to be able to die as you are dying, with no regret for the past."

The deep voice of the Ocean Tramp fell upon the ears of the dying man with strange cadence.

He had never seen Conrad so moved before, never known him to speak as he did.

"God bless you, Carlos, is my prayer.

"Your life has been one full of adversity I feel, and there is much in it you have not told, I am assured.

"But let the dead past bury its dead with you, and live for the future that you may die with hope of a world to come.

"Lay me by the side of dear Cora, and place over us, Carlos, a monument telling the simple, truthful story of our lives.

"Now let me sleep, Carlos, and for fear I may never awaken in this life, bid me farewell."

The convict was deeply moved as he grasped the hand of the noble man.

He had seen death in its worst forms, he had witnessed many ruthless scenes, and beheld much of anguish and sorrow, and yet had remained unnerved.

But now this dying man made him feel from his inmost heart all that it was to live, all that it was to die.

He called a servant to sit in the room, walked out upon the piazza, lighted a cigar and began to pace to and fro as though upon a ship's deck.

Suddenly he heard a call and hastened into the room.

"It is over, Carlos—God bless you!"

He had grasped the hand of Andrew Esmond and felt its pressure in return.

But the pressure relaxed and Andrew Esmond was dead.

His heir was a convicted felon.

CHAPTER XLII.

A HAUNTED MAN.

A SHADOW of gloom fell upon the community of which Andrew Esmond had been a member, when it became known that he had passed from life.

It had long been expected that he would die, and yet people had hoped that it would yet be some time, for he was popular with one and all.

Many planters came to offer sympathy to the brother-in-law, and when the day of the funeral came there was a large crowd, assembled from far and wide.

Into the grave, by the side of his loved wife, Andrew Esmond was laid to rest, and the friends of the dead man, and of the living one, left the spot to its gloom.

But there was one who remained to see the grave made into the mound which none can mistake the world over, and then stood gazing down upon the clay that covered the remains of his friend, after the two old negro grave-diggers had hurried homeward.

That one was Carlos Conrad.

He had ample food for thought, and he lingered there alone, lost in deep and painful meditation.

What a life had been his.

He reviewed it, standing by the grave of the man he loved, from his boyhood to that moment.

He was a man of strangely strong feelings.

He had loved Belmont the Buccaneer as a brother, and so had sought to avenge him, and that love had caused him to erect over his grave a monument.

A monument to a pirate!

How strange the thought.

And yet the same strong feelings actuated him toward Andrew Esmond, whom he had dearly loved.

The fact that he had been left his heir did not cause him to act from selfish motives.

He loved the man for himself, and had since boyhood, and, to do him justice, there was no sordid motive in his regard.

And so he stood there by the grave, thinking, sorrowing.

At last he turned to go, and a sigh escaped his lips.

Then he started, for he beheld a man standing within a few feet of him, and regarding him with a calm, yet malignant look.

He was not one to be easily unnerved, and yet there was something in the face of the man before him that caused a chill to fall upon his heart.

"Well, my friend, you are a stranger in these parts?" he said, quietly.

"But not a stranger to you, Senor Conrad," was the reply.

"Ah! where have we met?" and Carlos Conrad regarded the face of the speaker attentively.

"We have met on a pirate deck, Senor Conrad, where I was coxswain and you were first luff under Belmont the Buccaneer."

The reply came in a voice that was full of mischief, and the eyes, the smile even also threatening.

The man had come there feeling himself master of the situation.

Carlos Conrad started at his words and bit his lip nervously.

He recalled one who had before remembered him as a pirate, one whose death in a boat one night in New York harbor, had sent him to prison for life.

He was done with the past, he thought, and now he found himself haunted with a shadow that fell darkly upon him.

He had been left a fortune, he was respected by those who knew him, he had a home to himself, slaves, all to make life pleasant, to try and make him forget the bygone.

Near the graves of his mother, his sister and Andrew Esmond, whom he dearly loved, he thought he could dwell in peace the remainder of his life.

But suddenly this haunting shadow fell upon him.

He realized that he was a haunted man, a man whose crimes would dog his steps, whose past would rise up before him.

He had learned to love Lulu Vance, the beautiful daughter of a neighboring planter, and he had reason to believe that she would accept his hand, for she had already betrayed to him that she was far from indifferent to him.

Like lightning these thoughts flashed through his brain, as he stood there by the grave of Andrew Esmond.

The man faced him, calm, malignant and prepared for a scene.

"Well, sir, I recall you now, as coxswain of the schooner; but that was in the past, so what do you want with me now?"

"I am poor, you are rich."

"Ah! you are a beggar?"

"No, I demand! I do not beg."

"You take a wrong course to get gold from me, by demanding."

"You called me a beggar."

"Well, what do you want?"

"I am ashore, flat broke, and I wish to get a vessel, arm her and man her."

"It will take thirty thousand dollars, and—"

"Thirty thousand devils!"

"You are a fool!"

"I differ with you, for I think I show sound sense in going to one for gold who I know will give it to me."

"You are mistaken, for I will only give you a few hundreds, for the sake of our once having been shipmates together."

"Don't you be a fool, senor, for I said I wanted thirty thousand dollars."

"And I will never give you that sum."

"Stay, senor, consider, for you are a rich man, worth fully five times that sum, and I am a poor tar ashore with only a few pesos to keep me from starving."

"I am a good sailor, and I flatter myself will make a good captain, so I can readily make a fortune under the black flag."

"Come, give me the sum I ask you and don't be foolish."

"I will give you nothing."

"Senor, some weeks ago I reached New Orleans in hard luck."

"I met you in the streets one day, recognized you, for you have not a form and face to readily forget, and I followed you to your hotel."

"I learned that you dwelt up the river on a plantation, and supposed that you had invested your private money in a place determined to live like a gentleman."

"I tracked you here, and I learned all in the week that I have been hanging about in various disguises."

"I know that you are not suspected of being what you are, a pirate."

"I know that your brother-in-law did not believe you to be a bad man."

"I am aware that he left you his entire fortune, and that you are honored in the community by all."

"I am also acquainted with the fact that it is your intention to marry a rich and lovely young lady of the neighborhood."

"Knowing what I do, I ask you to give out of your riches the sum of thirty thousand dollars to a poor sea-dog who is down in the world."

"Will you do it, senor?"

"I will not."

"Then I shall have to let your respectful friends your lovely love and all in the neighborhood, know that they are entertaining a

devil unawares, who is in the form of an angel."

"A wolf in sheep's wool, in fact, Senor Conrad," was the sneering response of the man.

CHAPTER XLIII.

FROM THE GRAVE'S DEPTHS.

THE quiet manner in which Carlos Conrad listened to the words and threats of the sailor, rather deceived him.

The man seemed to feel that his victim was cowed and would yield.

But hardly had his threat left his lips, when Carlos Conrad took several quick turns back and forth, as though in thought.

The man deemed him deciding that he must accept his terms.

But Carlos Conrad was a man of quick thought and he had already decided what he would do.

In those few paces that he made, he had cast his eyes upon all sides of him.

The little burying-ground was in a magnolia grove, and about it was a Cherokee hedge over which the tall form of Carlos Conrad enabled him to see.

A road ran from the graveyard to the highway, and a gravel walk led across the field, alongside a row of Lombardy poplars, to the villa, a quarter of a mile distant.

In his sweeping glance Carlos Conrad saw no one in sight.

All had gone, and the two old negro gravediggers had just disappeared at the other end of the gravel path.

Determined to come back the next day and clean up the little burying-ground they had left their spades and shovels there.

These the eyes of Carlos Conrad fell upon.

Then it was that he determined to act, to rid himself at once of a phantom that would mar his whole future life if he did not do so promptly.

With a bound he was upon the man, who, taken by surprise, was felled to the ground by a stunning blow upon the temple, and his neck almost broken by the iron grip upon it.

For a moment did Carlos Conrad maintain that grip upon the throat, and then he sprang to his feet.

Seizing a spade, he quickly threw the soft earth out of the grave.

Once or twice he ran outside of the hedge that surrounded the graves and glanced about him.

But he saw no one.

No one saw the act.

Working with great strength and quickness, he soon had the grave below the level of the ground.

Into a trench hollowed out in it, the body was thrown, and then the earth was rapidly thrown upon it.

All happened so quickly that within twenty minutes the sailor was knocked down, buried and the grave filled in as before.

The spade and shovel were put back, when all looked as it had before the tragedy enacted there, and, in the gathering gloom, Carlos Conrad walked rapidly toward his home.

Going to his room he soon arranged his toilet, and went in to the tempting supper which had been gotten for him.

Just as he sat down the village lawyer came and joined him, and after the meal the two sat together for several hours in the library, arranging the details of Carlos Conrad's inheritance.

Little did the good old attorney think that his client, whom he so much admired, had committed a murder within the past few hours, a murder at the grave of the man who had willed him his fortune.

The attorney remained all night at the hospitable house, and when he departed the next day, Carlos Conrad congratulated himself upon the fact that he was master of the plantation and a hundred slaves, while there was a handsome sum in bank also to his credit.

Then he walked over to the little burying-ground and found the two negroes at work there cleaning up.

"Pears to me, massa, dat de grave seem mighty much higher dan it were yistiddy," said Uncle Sol.

"Oh no, it is as you left it," quickly replied Carlos Conrad.

"Don't yer think, massa, it am too high, and we'd better trim it down, sah?"

"No, leave it as it is; but plant violets upon it, until I have the monument made, and that will completely cover it."

"Yas, massa," and the negroes did as they were directed, their master remaining until they left the spot.

Then he called for his carriage and drove to the city, where he ordered a handsome monument, upon which he had the names engraved of his mother, his sister and Andrew Esmond.

A line in memoriam appropriate to his mother's and sister's character he had inscribed beneath their names, while under that of Andrew Esmond were the simple words:

"A TRUE MAN."

For some time did Carlos Conrad keep close at home, attending to the cares of his estate, and then came the monument one day, and personally he watched the workmen put it up.

He was careful to see that there should be no digging down into the grave.

The mounds were smoothed off level with the earth, the massive stones were put in place over the graves, and then the broken column that he had reared to the memory of those whose ashes lay in that sacred spot.

Until the last he remained, seeing the work all done, the debris cleared away.

The workmen had departed, the shadows were gathering, and still he lingered.

He seemed to be held there by a fascination he could not resist.

The massive base of the monument covered the three graves, of mother, sister and Andrew Esmond, and the words came to his lips:

"The secret is hidden now until the Day of Judgment."

"I had hoped never again to raise my hand against but one man, that one the man who hanged Belmont the Buccaneer."

"But this fool brought his death upon himself."

"I must be careful not to go to the city any more than is necessary, for I may be seen there and recognized by others who have served with me on a pirate deck, and this must not be, for now I am free, with this secret buried here, to ask Lulu Vance to become my wife."

"When she has pledged herself to marry me I will take a run North and consummate my revenge upon Rufus Sprague, he who strung up Belmont the Buccaneer to the yard-arm."

"When that is done I will live content."

"Ah! the shadows are coming on, so I will leave this spot and its memories."

As he spoke he turned to go, but a cry broke from his lips as he found his way barred.

It was the pirate sailor who stood before him—the man whom he believed he had killed and buried beneath the monument!

CHAPTER XLIV.

THE CONVICT'S MASTER.

FOR the first time in his whole life did Carlos Conrad feel the sensation of fear.

It was awe, horror, fear combined.

His face became livid, and his arms hung limp at his side.

The Cherokee hedge, thick, thorny and five feet in height, barred his escape, or he might have fled in his terror from what he felt was the ghost of the dead sailor.

The gateway in the hedge was occupied by the apparition, as he believed it.

A sailor, he was superstitious.

Having stunned a man with a blow meant to be deadly, and choked him afterward with a grip of iron, after which he had buried him two feet under ground, he had every reason to believe that what he beheld before him could only be the ghost of his victim, and not him in flesh, bone and blood.

Twilight was coming on, and yet the daylight shone brightly, for the sun was just below the horizon, so it seemed that the haunting phantom had come out ahead of time, before the somber hour of midnight, when spooks are supposed to prowl about to frighten human beings.

An instant of this horror, and the man spoke.

He was not as penetrating as he might have been, and did not realize how frightened Carlos Conrad really was.

"I startled you, senor, for you believed me dead."

"But I am no ghost."

Carlos Conrad drew a deep breath.

He was gaining his nerve quickly.

He saw that the man, in some way, had escaped death, and next time there must be no mistake.

But his nerves were too much unstrung yet for him to carry out his impulse and again spring upon the man.

So he waited a moment, controlled his awe and said, in a voice that it was hard to keep from quivering:

"So I did not kill you after all, coxswain?"

"No; and if you have any intention of trying it again, don't be a fool and make the attempt, for I am not alone."

Carlos Conrad glanced uneasily about him.

He felt that he was entrapped.

But he kept up his coolness, and said:

"You are wise not to be; but tell me, pray, how you escaped before?"

"I was not such a fool as to come alone then."

"A comrade, one who was also a shipmate of yours, senor, came with me."

"He was waiting for me over yonder by the river, and I told him if I did not return in half an hour to look me up."

"He did so, saw you leaving this spot alone, and yet had seen me enter the inclosure."

"He saw that the grave looked very high, suspected that you had killed me and buried me in it."

"So he set to work and dug down to me."

"Had he not been quick at his work, I would have died."

"But he saw that I lived, found no wound upon me, only a bruise on my temple here, and the imprint of fingers upon my throat, and so he carried me at a run over to the river."

"There he revived me, and I told him what had happened."

"We came back, threw the dirt in loosely to make the mound look high, as before, and then took our boat back to the city."

"I was unnerved and suffering, for you deal no light blow, senor, and have no gentle grip."

"Then the experience of having been buried alive was not pleasant."

"So it made me ill, and I lay for weeks in a fever."

"But I rallied, and I owe my life to my mate."

"Then we plotted together, and we let others into our secret, of getting a vessel, arming her and sailing once more under the black flag."

"So, senor, I shall need the thirty thousand I demanded of you, with as much more for my mate, you know, and that is little enough."

Carlos Conrad did not move or utter a word during the time that the pirate coxswain was speaking.

He felt that the man held him in his power, for he was sure that he spoke the truth when he said that he was not alone.

He knew that he would be betrayed, ruined, and yet how he could save himself he did not know.

He must yield to the demands of the men, who had become his masters, possessing his secret as they did.

For some time he was lost in thought.

Then he said calmly:

"How many know this secret?"

"My mate and myself, and four others."

"Where are they?"

"My mate stands yonder, behind that large magnolia tree, and the four others are in a boat on the river, awaiting our return, with orders to come here to seek us if we delay half an hour."

"You demand thirty thousand dollars?"

"No, sixty thousand, for my mate and myself, to be used as a nest egg, in case things go wrong at sea."

"Then we want forty thousand for a fine vessel, arms and equipments, with advance pay for eighty men."

"Devils! a hundred thousand?"

"Yes, senor."

"You will ruin me!"

"You have as much more?"

"I have not, for my entire wealth is not over a hundred and fifty thousand, if that."

"Well, for your sake I am sorry it is not more; but we must have what I demand, or you are to be arrested as Carlos Conrad, the lieutenant of Belmont the Buccaneer, and convict whom one of our men saw in prison under life-sentence, while he was serving a few years there."

"We will all swear to you, and prove that we were honest sailors, captured by you when a pirate."

"What do you say, senor?"

For once the bold man was cowed.

He felt that he was at the mercy of a man who meant all that he said.

The prison loomed up before him again, the yard-arm was like a phantom before him.

Then he knew that disgrace would fall upon those he loved, his mother, sister and Andrew Esmond.

He would be hated by Lulu Vance and all who then respected him.

"I will tell you what I will do, coxswain," he said in a quivering voice.

"Well, senor?"

"I will, to pay you that sum, have to sell my plantation and slaves, and it will leave me but a small sum, which I will take with me to some foreign land and endeavor to live there an honest life."

"Here I cannot remain, and I shall expect your pledge that if I sacrifice myself for you, that not a breath of the secret you hold shall ever be made known here, or elsewhere."

"I have sinned in my life, I have been all that is wicked; but I do not wish shame to fall upon the graves of those I love through my acts."

"I ask you therefore, man, if many you are, if I give you this gold you demand, that you vow solemnly, by your own mother's memory, never to betray me."

The man was impressed by the words and manner of Carlos Conrad and replied:

"I do so now, Senor Conrad, and I shall keep my vow."

"Give us the gold we demand, and from that moment I, and my mates, forget you."

"Very well, meet me, to-morrow at noon, in the city at the hotel where you saw me before."

"Senor is this an excuse to get away?"

"Have you not sense enough to know that I cannot sell my plantation and slaves without some preparation?"

"I must find a purchaser and—"

"I understand, senor, so I will meet you there as you desire."

"It may take a longer time to arrange it, but I will give you the money within the week, and then go your way, as I shall go mine."

"Now be off."

The man bowed and walked away in the gathering gloom of night, and Carlos Conrad, with the iron entering deep into his soul returned to his house.

CHAPTER XLV.

TEMPTED.

LULU VANCE was certainly a very lovable girl.

She was beautiful, refined, and possessed a lovely character.

Though much her senior, for she was not nineteen, Carlos Conrad had won her heart.

He was a natural musician and possessed a superb voice, and she being musical he had at first made an impression though what was a bond of sympathy between them.

Then his splendid form and handsome face were most attractive to her, while he had a manner that was very fascinating.

He talked well, never of himself, though he had seen much of the world, and being the brother of the late Mrs. Andrew Esmond, proved that he came of good family.

It had been hinted that he had left his home when a boy, and ran off to sea, and this had been a touch of romance which Lulu Vance liked.

He had shown her in many ways that he admired her, and so she had given her heart leave to love with no thought of the future.

The devotion of Carlos Conrad to his brother-in-law, a confirmed invalid, had also been a strong card in his behalf.

And so it was that Lulu Vance went on dreaming, hoping and building air castles.

Since the death of Andrew Esmond Carlos had gone nowhere to visit, except to the elegant home of Planter Vance.

This seemed encouraging to Lulu.

One evening she was seated upon the piazza, enjoying the rising moon.

It was the same evening on which Carlos Conrad had met at the grave of Andrew Esmond what he had at first deemed to be the ghost of the pirate sailor.

In truth it was but an hour after his parting with that individual.

He had gone to his home, looked over some papers, and then mounting his horse, had ridden over to the Vance Villa.

Lulu saw him coming, and she met him as he ascended the broad steps to the piazza.

His manner was subdued, and she felt that his visit was to her.

This was the more her opinion when he asked for her father.

Had he come to ask her hand?

So she thought, and she knew what her father's answer would be, while her heart told her what would be her reply.

The planter, a courtly gentleman with white hair, led his guest into the library.

He too had the same thought as his daughter.

"Mr. Vance, I have called upon you to ask a great favor."

"Well, Mr. Conrad, anything that I can grant, gladly will I do so," was the reply.

"I have had news, sir, that demands that I at once leave my home."

"I do not care to sell the plantation, for it holds the ashes of those I love, nor would I wish to part with the faithful slaves entirely."

"Still I have to go, as business calls me elsewhere, and I may be kept away for an indefinite period."

"This is a great regret to me, Mr. Conrad, and will be to all your friends," said the planter.

"And to me, sir, for I had hoped to live here the remainder of my years."

"But what I ask of you, sir, is that you purchase my slaves at a mere nominal figure and have the credit of buying also the plantation and home."

"I have eighty-nine slaves, young and old, and I will dispose of them to you for forty thousand dollars, on condition that some day I can buy them back with interest added to the purchasing sum."

"The plantation, I wish to place in your name also, without your paying for it, for I have perfect confidence in you, sir."

"Thus you can keep the slaves upon it, work the place and retain all profits."

"But I wish it to be thought that I sold out entirely and leave this part of the country, though it is my intention to return at some future day."

"I have money in New Orleans to carry out certain plans I have in view, excepting a sum of forty thousand dollars, and that I desire you to let me have upon the terms that I have suggested."

"Will you do this for me, Mr. Vance?"

It was plain that the planter was taken by surprise.

He was too courtly a gentleman to ask his visitor for his reasons; but he was a man of large wealth, and could easily spare the sum asked for, especially under the circumstances.

The Conrad Plantation joined his own, and he knew that it was a valuable property, while the slaves were worth double the sum asked for them.

So he told Carlos Conrad frankly that he would grant his request, and a servant was dispatched to the village for their respective attorneys.

In good time they arrived, and they too were surprised at the sudden act of Carlos Conrad.

But he gave no reason, other than that he had business of an important nature to call him away, and he was compelled to go.

So the papers were drawn up, conveying to Mr. Vance the plantation and slaves, and a draft upon a New Orleans bank given for the sum asked for.

Then Carlos Conrad bade farewell to the planter, and took the hand of Lulu in his own, while he said:

"I am going away, Lulu, but I do not know for how long."

"Do not forget me, I beg of you."

She stood like one in a dream, as he walked

away, mounted his horse and dashed off at a gallop.

The next day farewells were said to the slaves, with a few words that daty called him away, and, true to his promise to the pirate seaman, he met him in New Orleans at his hotel.

"I have ruined myself for you," he said sternly to the man.

"I have sold my home, slaves and all, and go forth again in the world as a wanderer."

"You have done so, senior, as I know, for I had a watch upon you," was the cool reply.

"Hah! you have dared to watch me, to doubt me?"

"The pledges of pirates are worthless, senior, where interest of self is at stake, so I was determined that you should not give me the slip, so I had a spy upon your movements and know that you really did sell your estate, your slaves, and gave up your lady-love."

"I had not believed that you would have to do so; but it seems you are not so rich as I supposed and rumor gives you the credit of being."

"It was a hundred thousand, you know, I demanded—forty thousand for the vessel, thirty thousand for myself and as much more for my friend."

"I know just what it is."

"And, senior, if you are willing, I am sure I will be glad to have you be our captain, for to you I will serve as second luff, and my friend can hold third rank."

"I know what you are, senior, and we can share profits so that you can gain back your fortune in time."

Carlos Conrad was silent for a moment.

He seemed tempted by the offer, and at last said:

"Let me understand you, senior."

"Yes."

"You offer me the captaincy of your vessel?"

"I do."

"Upon what terms?"

"You are to go as full chief, but you and I are to share equally in the profits, and the other officers and men are to be upon a percentage."

"You think you can trust me?"

"I am sure of it, senior, and well I know your ability."

"Well, as I will go forth to-day with very little to call my own, after paying you this money, and I despise to be poor, I am tempted to accept your offer."

"Get your vessel, arm and man her and then send me word to an address that I will give you, where I am to join you and I will come; but let me tell you that I know of a craft, one about completed and armed, building in Baltimore for the Columbians, and it would be cheaper to cut her out than to buy one."

"Certainly, senior, and the money I hold for the purchase of a vessel I will return half of to you, if we get the craft without pay."

"I shall expect that, so get your men together here, sail in a merchant craft for Baltimore and I will meet you there just six weeks from to-day, and will have all arranged for the cutting out of the vessel."

"She is fast, senior?"

"She is built for speed."

"A fair size?"

"Yes, and will carry a broadside of four guns, with a pivot mounted forward and astern and the latter are very heavy guns."

"I happened to know of her through an American officer who is having her built for the Columbians and who passed a few weeks at the house of my brother-in-law, whose friend he was."

"Senior Captain Conrad, you delight me, and I gladly yield to your views."

"I will have the crew gotten together, picked men all of them, and seventy in number, and we will take passage on some craft I will charter for the voyage, and start so as to arrive on time."

"I felt, senior, that the old feeling had not left you, that you were still at heart a bold sea rover, and, under your command I look for wonders to be performed."

"One moment?"

"Yes, senior."

"Tell me just how many men know me as I am?"

"Two besides myself, senior."

"Who are they?"

"My friend Winstone, who sailed with you, and an old shipmate who was with me for years, and to whom I told the secret for fear you might play me false and he could avenge me."

"These are all?"

"Yes, senior."

"Do not betray me to others, for I do not care to be known to have been other than Conrad the Corsair."

"I can understand that, senior, as, if you win a fortune under the Black Flag you will still wish to return to the light of two bright eyes."

"I comprehend, Senior Captain."

"You have read me, so I beg you to keep my secret from all others."

"Upon a pirate's honor, will I, Captain Conrad."

"Enough, I trust you."

"Now let me turn over to you these bank-notes," and the large sum of money was counted out bill by bill and the pirate sailor Las Vegas departed from the hotel feeling happy at his triumph over his old commander, and delighted at again having to serve under him, for the outlaw was not as confident of his own abilities to become a successful buccaneer chief as he pretended to be.

CHAPTER XLVI.

THE PLOTTER.

IN the cabin of a vessel at anchor in Baltimore Harbor, an officer sat at a table looking over some papers.

The vessel had the appearance of being new, and the furniture of the cabin had evidently not been long in place. The cabin was comfortably furnished, and about it were signs of luxury, such as a good liver might wish to have in a place that was to be his home for a long time.

Upon deck all was stir and preparation, for men were busy in getting guns into place, bending on sails and touching up the vessel here and there, while a couple of officers were directing the work.

The craft was a schooner, trim as a yacht in build and showing stanch sea-going powers as well as speed in her model.

Her masts were very tall, tapering and raked far aft, while the long spars showed that she could spread a vast amount of sail when needed.

Her battery consisted of ten guns, four to a broadside and a pivot mounted fore and aft.

There were boxes of small-arms on deck, still unpacked, and her crew had evidently not yet come on board, as there were less than a score of men visible all told.

With the exception of one or two of these the others were of foreign birth, their dark faces showing their Spanish origin.

The schooner was anchored away to itself, and but a few days before had come out of the shipyard.

The officer in the cabin was dressed in a fatigue uniform, such as were worn by the naval officers of Colombia at that time.

He was bronzed as from sea service, but was not a Spaniard, but an American.

His face was striking in the perfection of the features and the boldness that rested upon it.

Presently there came a hail from the deck, and soon after an officer appeared in the cabin, and said:

"Captain Rockwell, a boat has come alongside, sir, and it brings an old man who says he is anxious to see you."

"Send him to me, then, Dorsey," was the reply, and the captain went on with his work of looking over his papers.

A minute after a man, seemingly bowed with age, for his hair and long beard were white, came into the cabin.

"Be seated, my man, and tell me how I can serve you," said Captain Rockwell, with that respect for gray hairs which showed that he had been well reared.

The old man sat down, and said:

"Captain, I've come to see you, sir, upon an important mission, and I must ask you beforehand to promise if you do not act upon my advice offered you, you will at least let me go unmolested from your vessel."

"This is a strange request, sir."

"I must ask it, sir, and more, that if you do act as I hope you will that you must grant me the full protection I demand."

"I certainly cannot understand just what you mean; but, as you appear to be the possessor of some knowledge that I should know, I will do as you ask."

"I have your word, then, in both cases?"

"Yes."

"Thank you, sir; and now I must beg you to answer my questions without anger, and then you are at liberty to question me, and all that I can make known to you I will."

Captain Rockwell looked surprised, but made no reply, and the visitor continued:

"You are Captain Edgar Rockwell, I believe?"

"I am."

"At present a captain in the Colombian naval service, and commander of this fine vessel which you came on here to have built for your Government?"

"You are right, sir."

"You are a Baltimorean, and, sailing on one of your father's vessels, years ago, left it to become a resident of the country which you have adopted as your own, and in which you now hold high rank?"

"You seem to know me pretty well, sir!" said Captain Rockwell, annoyed at the questioning of his strange visitor.

"I can tell you more, sir, for upon our way on to Baltimore you landed at New Orleans, and meeting there an old friend of your boyhood in this city, you went to his plantation with him as his guest to pass the few days you were waiting for a vessel to sail on which you could take passage to this port?"

"You have my movements down pretty well, sir, I confess."

"I can tell you also, sir, that you told your friend, Mr. Andrew Esmond, that you had come to America to have a vessel built, and showed him your model and plan of arming her."

"In the home of Andrew Esmond at the time of your visit, was another old boyhood friend, Carlos Conrad; but he was absent on business at the time and you failed to meet him."

"Now, having shown you that I know something about you, let me say that I have done so to gain your confidence, and to have you trust me."

"Well, my friend, to what does all this lead?"

"Your vessel is nearly ready for sea?"

"Yes, she will be ready to sail within a few days."

"Are her stores all on board?"

"Yes, nearly all."

"Her ammunition and small-arms?"

"You are inquisitive."

"I told you that I would question you, Captain Rockwell."

"Please answer me, for I will soon let you have your turn at questioning."

"Yes."

"You have no crew on board to speak of?"

"I have a dozen men who will sail with me, for I shall simply run the schooner under all speed to my adopted land and there her crew awaits her."

"Well, Captain Rockwell, let me tell you that there is a plot on hand to capture your vessel."

The captain started at this, and gazed more fixedly at the old man.

"What do you say?"

"I repeat that there is a plot formed to cut your vessel out."

"Can this be possible?"

"It is true."

"How do you know this?"

"I will tell you what I do know."

"Pray do so."

"Your vessel lies at a lonely anchorage here, and is about ready for sea."

"She has been built for speed and sea-going qualities of a high order, and she is splendidly armed and equipped."

"Hence she is just what a sea rover would wish."

"You have but a handful of men on board, and intend to take her to your country with these, getting your crew there."

"Some of the men working now on your vessel go ashore at night, being ship carpenters employed in the yards here, and this

leaves on board yourself, two under officers, a cook and steward and eight seamen."

"You have the number pretty close."

"I have had my eye upon your vessel for two weeks."

"A frank confession, surely."

"I have, as I said, the knowledge that she is to be cut out."

"When, and how?"

"A man reached port some days ago, coming by a coaster from Norfolk."

"He saw your schooner, got all information regarding her, and that there was no vessel-of-war in port, and that you had but a dozen men on board, and kept very slack watch, naturally not deeming it necessary."

"He left port upon gaining this information, with a clever plot formed to cut her out."

"And yet he has gone?"

"Yes, down to Norfolk, to return in a coasting craft which will put into port about dark, in a disabled condition."

"As though going to the dock for repairs, she will anchor near you for the night."

"You would discover but half a dozen seamen on board, apparently coasters; but in the hold there would be some thirty more."

"At night you would be hailed and asked for some medicine, as a man was taken very ill on board, so the excuse would run."

"The boat that boarded you would have under a canvas a dozen men, and your watch would be struck down without mercy, and another boat would be ready to board you, and your vessel would readily be taken."

The anchor would be quickly raised, sail set and your schooner would go flying down the Chesapeake, and when a few leagues away she would meet a schooner on board of which would be over two-score men."

"These would board your vessel, you and your crew would be put to death and your beautiful vessel would hoist the old flag of Belmont the Buccaneer, a black field, with a white skull in the center and around the latter in red letters the words:

"THE WORLD IS MINE."

"That is the plot, Captain Rockwell, and the plotter is one who sailed under Belmont the Buccaneer as an officer."

CHAPTER XLVII.

UNMASKED.

CAPTAIN EDGAR ROCKWELL, of the Columbian Navy, gazed in utter amazement at the old man, who made known to him a plot so startling.

He could not but see that all that he said was to be done, could be done.

There was nothing to prevent its being carried out successfully.

Tired with the work they had done to get their vessel to sea as soon as possible, officers and men turned in early into their hammocks and a watch of but one man was kept upon deck.

The schooner was anchored far away from other vessels, and the man, or men, taken by surprise, expecting no danger from a small coasting craft, could readily be struck down, the hatches and cabin closed and the schooner taken to sea, perhaps without raising the slightest alarm.

He saw that the old man spoke advisedly, and he was convinced of the truth of all that he had said.

"You fairly astound me, my good sir, in what you tell me," he said, after his first surprise was over.

"It is a well formed plot, sir."

"It certainly is, and a bold man has been the one to plot it."

"Yes, sir."

"An officer of the Buccaneer Belmont, who was hanged at the yard-arm years ago, you say?"

"Yes sir, a lieutenant whose name is Conrado."

"I have heard of him, as a bold man, scarcely surpassed by Belmont."

"A Spaniard, I believe, from his name."

"Doubtless, sir."

"And was he the man who came here on the vessel you referred to, and then left?"

"No, sir, that was his lieutenant, a man whose name is Las Vegas."

"And this Conrado?"

"Is now in port."

"Indeed!"

"Yes, sir."

"Do you know where?"

"I do."

"You have seen him?"

"I have."

"When?"

"To-day."

"You can take me to him?"

"I could, but I will not."

"What do you mean?"

"I have a better plan."

"Ah!"

"Yes, sir, I have a plot to save your vessel."

"Well, I certainly will listen to your plot to aid me with the greatest respect, after all you have told me."

"I have terms to make."

"Ah! you want gold?"

"No."

"What then?"

"I will not serve you for gold."

"Then what are your terms?"

"That you grant me certain favors."

"Name them."

"To explain, let me say that you had better go ashore to-night and get half a hundred good men."

"Well?"

"Have them come out to your vessel after midnight, and keep them all below decks to-morrow."

"Let your men go on with their work on deck during the day, as usual; but have a close watch at night, and let the boat's crew board you."

"Then you can capture them all, and next take the little coaster."

"Getting up sail you can run down the bay and capture the other coaster with those on board."

"A good plan, indeed, my dear sir; but what of yourself?"

"How do you mean?"

"Your reward?"

"My reward will be revenge, Captain Rockwell," was the calm reply.

"Ah!"

"That is a motive that governs many of us, sir."

"I have reason to feel revengeful, Captain Rockwell," was the stern response.

"I will not pry into your secrets, sir; but tell me what was the favor which you had to ask?"

"It is that when you have captured the pirates to at once hang three of them which one person will make known to you."

"Two of them will be principal officers, and the other the boatswain."

"One of these officers is Conrado, then?"

"No, senor, he will not be taken."

"Why is this?"

"Because he cannot be; but you will save your vessel and your life, with the lives of your men."

"You will capture a number of pirates, and among them two men who are officers, and you can hang."

"But Conrado?"

"You have given me your pledge to grant the favor I ask?"

"I have."

"Upon your honor as an officer?"

"I do so give it."

"Then, Captain Rockwell, let me tell you that Conrado is no longer a pirate, but is trying to lead an honest life."

"He was discovered by this man Las Vegas, and robbed, by threats, of a large fortune."

"Then, feeling himself incompetent to carry out his plans to seize a vessel and turn pirate chief, Las Vegas asked Conrado to be the captain and share with him."

"After the work was done and Las Vegas found that he could command, Conrado would have been gotten rid of."

"Knowing this, Conrado yielded to the supposed temptation to again hoist the black flag of his old chief, and planned the capture of your vessel."

"He is in the port, and is to board the coaster to-morrow."

"He is the one who is to seize your vessel, and then sail her down the bay to meet the coasting schooner with Las Vegas, the other lieutenant, the boatswain, and forty odd men on board."

"Now you know the truth, and being forewarned you can save your vessel, capture Conrado, pretend to at once hang him, but let him go, and when you capture the

others, string up Las Vegas and the other two without mercy."

"That will be my revenge, Captain Rockwell, and I am Conrado."

CHAPTER XLVIII.

CAUGHT IN THE TOILS.

HAD the visitor to Captain Rockwell told him that he was the ghost of Belmont the Buccaneer he could not have been more surprised than to have him say that he was Conrado.

He half-sprung to his feet, but at once resumed his seat, and asked, with deepest interest:

"You say that you are Conrado the Corsair?"

"I am."

"And you were once the lieutenant of Belmont the Buccaneer?"

"I was."

"Why were you not captured with your chief and his vessel?"

"His vessel was sunk in action with an American privateer, and Captain Belmont was taken with a few of his crew and hanged."

"I was absent at the island retreat of the chief, having taken a prize there."

"Since then I have not been a pirate, but have endeavored to lead an honest life."

"Recognized, as I said, by Las Vegas, and known to the others, I was forced to pay them a large fortune in hush money."

"Then they offered to make me captain, and I planned the capture of Las Vegas and the others by you, pretending that I was to cut your vessel out when ready for sea."

"Hang those three men who hold my secret, and I am more than repaid, for I have my revenge and can continue to live without fear of being found out."

"But, I wish it given to the public at once, Captain Rockwell, that it was Conrado the Corsair, the old lieutenant of Belmont the Buccaneer, who planned the cutting out of your vessel and was at once hanged by you; but, when you have taken the second coaster with those men and strung them up, I shall hold you to your pledge to release me."

"I shall keep my word, sir, and more, I shall swing up several of the men who board the schooner with you, to at once let the men believe I have hanged you, while you can go to my cabin and remain."

"I thank you, sir."

"I have more to thank you for; but in truth, I am glad that you have changed your evil life."

"As I am, sir."

"But I thought that Conrado was a young man?"

"It was years ago, sir, when I was with Belmont the Buccaneer."

"True; but still I did not expect to see as old a man as you are."

"I will frankly tell you, Captain Rockwell, that this wig and beard are false; but I beg of you not to ask me to remove them."

"I shall respect your request, Senor Conrado; but let me again thank you and ask you to join me in a glass of wine."

Conrado bowed acquiescence and soon after took his leave, while Captain Rockwell was left in deep thought at all that had occurred.

But he soon decided to act, and going to the town in a boat sought out several haunts of sailors, when ashore, and secured nearly three-score of good men for the work in hand.

They were quietly smuggled on board of the schooner and concealed below, and the next day, as Conrado had said, just before sunset a coasting vessel came over near the cruiser and dropped anchor.

The topmast of the coaster was carried away, the bowsprit broken off and the sails torn, as though she had been in a severe storm, while the bulwarks also were stove in badly.

There were but half a dozen men seen upon her decks, and among them Captain Rockwell recognized in the skipper the pretended old man of the day before.

Darkness soon settled upon land and sea and all became quiet and on board each vessel.

The lights in the distant town went out one by one, and as the hour neared midnight a deep silence fell upon the scene.

Soon after a boat left the side of the cruiser.

It was a large, awkward-looking yawl pulled by one man, and with another, the pretended old skipper in the stern.

"Schooner ahoy!" he hailed as he drew near.

"Ay ay!" responded the watch on the schooner.

"My mate are taken powerful ill, and I wish ter borry a leetle medicine ter fetch him round."

"All right, come on board and I'll see what I can get for you," responded Captain Rockwell, who was on watch.

The yawl came alongside and a moment after a dozen men came clambering over the side.

As they did so they were felled to the deck by the crew of the schooner and at once dragged below before they could make an outcry.

Conrado at once slipped into the cabin, at the request of Captain Rockwell, and a moment after another boat dashed up in the darkness.

The men came over the side of the schooner in an exultant manner, and shared the same fate as their comrades.

"Up with the anchor and crowd on sail!" came the order from Captain Rockwell.

The command was quickly obeyed, and the beautiful vessel sped down the bay under sail, leaving the deserted coast at anchor.

"Up to the yard-arm there with the leaders of this pirate crew!" commanded Captain Rockwell, and quickly at the ends of the large yard of the schooner's squaresail were dangling two men, who were hanged in irons, and with gags in their mouths, that no outcry could be made.

The rest of the pirate crew were kept below, but Captain Rockwell called out in a loud voice that reached their ears, and was of course heard by his own men:

"That ends the career of Conrad the Corsair, the lieutenant of Belmont the Buccaneer, who met the same fate.

"Cut them down, men, when they are dead, and the chains will sink them to the bottom!"

This order was also obeyed, the bodies falling with a loud splash into the waters, as the schooner sped swiftly on.

A run of a couple of hours and a vessel was seen ahead.

Captain Rockwell went into the cabin and learned from Carlos Conrad the signals to be made; but upon returning to the deck at once, saw that there were two vessels.

One was soon seen to be a cruiser, and she fired a shot across the bows of the schooner to come to, and the other was a coasting schooner.

The summons to come to was promptly obeyed by Captain Rockwell, who at once had a boat lowered, and went on board of the vessel.

It proved to be a brig-of-war, and the captain reported having captured the coaster, which some fishermen had told him was a suspicious craft, as a large number of men had been seen on board, and also, a couple of days before she had put a crew of thirty men on board a small craft, and it had stood in toward the city.

"I sighted the craft and gave chase, but the fellow ran into shallow water, took to his boats and escaped me," said the brig's commander.

Captain Rockwell then told how he had been secretly informed of an attempt to capture his vessel, and had prepared accordingly.

The result he also made known, and, true to his pledge to Carlos Conrad, he led the officer to believe that he had hanged the alleged leader of the pirates, Conrad.

He regretted that the crew of the other coaster had escaped him, and then returned to his schooner and gave orders to put back to the city.

Having seen his schooner on her course to port, and enjoyed noting how rapidly she was dropping the brig-of-war, which was a fleet vessel, Captain Rockwell went into the cabin to have a talk with Carlos Conrad.

In a few words he told Conrad what he had discovered, and he saw that the escape of Las Vegas and the others made a deep impression upon him.

"You have done well, Captain Rockwell—

all that you could do; but for the cruiser and those meddling fishermen, we would have taken them all.

"As it is, with those three men free, I dare not carry out certain plans I had of returning to the home I had when discovered by them."

"But they will believe you hanged."

"They may not, and they will look me up to be certain.

"No; I must go elsewhere, and begin life anew.

"But I thank you, sir."

"As I do you, Senor Conrado; but I wish you success in your new career, and I shall ever remember you with kindly feelings.

"If the world goes hard with you, come to my adopted country, look me up, and I'll get you a command."

"Indeed, I thank you, sir; but we are nearing your anchorage, are we not?"

"Yes, and the men know you only as an old man who betrayed the pirates' plot, so I will send you ashore as soon as we drop anchor."

Half an hour after, with a grasp of the hand, Carlos Conrad bade Captain Rockwell farewell, and was landed at a wharf.

"Well, there is but one thing for me to do, and I will do it.

"I must seek a home elsewhere, and it shall be in Boston."

CHAPTER XLIX.

THE STRANGE PASSENGER.

A VESSEL sailing out of Baltimore Harbor, and bound to Boston, some days after the unsuccessful attempt of the pirates to capture the Colombian schooner, carried as a passenger an old gentleman who offered a good price to the captain to let him go with him.

The vessel was a brig, a trim craft and a fleet sailer, with a small crew and a commander who appeared to understand his duties thoroughly.

Though the brig had a large cabin, handsomely fitted up, she never carried passengers, her captain said; but he had been prevailed upon to take the old gentleman in question, who had seemed most anxious to reach Boston and had offered double the fare to go in the merchant craft, rather than wait some days for the regular packet ship.

"I wish to get home to my people, captain, for I am an old man in failing health, so let me go with you, for I will pay you double passage money for the trouble I may be to you," had urged the old man, and the brig's skipper had yielded.

The aged passenger then came on board, bringing with him considerable luggage.

As the brig got up anchor and headed down the bay, the passenger was standing on deck, gazing at the grand scenery of the harbor, when his eyes fell upon an armed schooner that was coming along astern at a slapping pace.

"That is a fleet craft, Captain Herndon, and a pretty one," he said.

"Yes, she is both, and I believe she is going to outfoot my brig!" replied the captain.

"She's a cruiser, sir."

"Not an American one, though."

"Indeed?"

"No, she's a Colombian cruiser, built here by a young American, who is a captain in the service of Colombia.

"She came pretty near being taken the other night by pirates, as I suppose you heard?"

"I did hear something about it, sir; but I am a stranger and live far from here."

"Well, her captain got wind of the intended attack in some way, was prepared for the pirates, captured them and strung up to the end of the yard the pirate chief, Conrad, and his lieutenant.

"If an American cruiser had not taken the other craft belonging to the pirates, he would have taken them all."

"What a pity that he did not."

"Yes; but see, the schooner is overhauling us in a manner I do not half like."

"She is indeed, sir."

"She has just started on a voyage to her own country, and those who have said she was as fast as any craft afloat are not far wrong, for my brig has never met her match before."

"The schooner will pass you, Captain Herndon."

"I will crowd on sail, for I don't like to know that my pretty brig has found her equal in speed."

More sail was at once set on the brig and she sped along with renewed speed.

But the Colombian cruiser also set more canvas and came swiftly on in chase and gained steadily.

It was a beautiful sight to see the two fleet vessels dashing so swiftly along over the blue waters of the Chesapeake, driven by a ten-knot breeze, and the crew of the brig reflected in their faces the gloomy look upon their captain's, at finding that their beautiful vessel had more than met her match in the handsome cruiser.

As the schooner drew near, and it was seen that she intended to pass to leeward and close up to the brig, as though to show what she could do, the old passenger seemed to lose his interest in the race, for he said:

"I don't feel very well, so will go below."

Had the captain of the brig gone down into the cabin and seen how attentively he was watching the schooner from the stern ports, he would have wondered why he had left the deck.

Nearer and nearer drew the schooner, and, standing upon his quarter-deck, with pride at the manner in which his vessel was beating the brig, was Captain Rockwell.

"You have a fast craft, sir," he called out to Captain Herndon, as the two vessels were side by side, and but half a length apart, the brig retarding the speed of the schooner a little by blanketing her.

"I thought so, sir, until I saw you gain upon me as you have."

"I did not know my schooner's speed, and am glad to learn it, for I have heard that your brig was the fastest vessel that came into Baltimore."

"She has been, sir; but I congratulate you upon the speed your schooner develops, and a pleasant and safe voyage to you."

"Thank you, and the same to you," and Captain Rockwell raised his hat as his vessel began to forge ahead of the brig.

When night came on the schooner was a league ahead, and the brig went along on her course as if no longer trying to keep up with her fleet rival.

The voyage northward was a pleasant one, and the old man was often upon deck; but one night the captain asked him to go below as he was expecting a storm to break upon them.

There was not the shadow of a storm in sight, but the passenger obeyed, and yet not until he had discovered a vessel lying in their course ahead, and with a signal light set, it seemed.

He pretended to retire to his state-room, as the captain had told him he had better do; but yet his eyes and ears were open, and he heard orders given, knew that the brig was brought to, and then felt a slight shock, as though of a vessel coming alongside.

The sea was smooth, the wind was light, and the chafing of two vessels lying side by side was heard.

Then there came hurrying feet on deck, men descended into the cabin, traps in the floor were raised and down into a secret hiding place a number of boxes and bales were put.

All this the strange passenger saw, through a crack in the door, while he breathed heavily the while as though asleep.

Then came the order to cast loose the lines, the two vessels swung apart and the brig held upon her way to Boston.

It was night when she ran into the harbor, and the stranger passenger at once determined to go ashore.

This he did, bidding the captain good-by, and driving with his large supply of luggage to a hotel.

When however the carriage had gone a short distance, he called to the driver to halt, told him to go on to the hotel with his baggage and state that he would soon follow it, and to have a room prepared for Monsieur Carl Conrad.

As the vehicle drove away, the gray beard and wig of the passenger were suddenly taken off, his bent form straightened up, and at a quick pace he returned to the wharf at which lay the brig he had just left.

For a long while he remained there in the neighborhood, and what he saw seemed to please him, for he followed a wagon up the street and saw it drive into the back yard of an old rookery over the door of which was a sign which read:

"ISAAC RATHFELD,
LOAN OFFICE."

Taking the number and street down, the passenger wended his way to the hotel where he had sent his baggage.

As he entered the brightly lighted hallway it could be seen that he was none other than Carlos Conrad the escaped convict.

CHAPTER I.

SMUGGLER AND PIRATE.

THE fashionable society of Boston was enjoying a new sensation, some months after the arrival of the brig from Baltimore having Carlos Conrad as a passenger, in having to lionize a Southern planter who had visited the city with the intention of making it his home for the greater part of the year.

He was said to have large estates in Louisiana, and to possess vast wealth.

He certainly was a handsome man, something under forty years of age, had traveled much, was of Creole parentage and spoke English with just the slightest accent.

He also spoke Spanish fluently, and the Bostonians who knew, said that his French was the true Parisian.

He had joined the most fashionable club, lived in splendid style, having a black slave as his special valet and attendant, and drove and rode the very finest horseflesh.

It was said that he was a bachelor, and so it was hoped by many fond mothers that their daughter would draw the rich prize in the lottery of matrimonial bliss.

The name of this distinguished person was Monsieur Carl Conrad, and all delighted to do him honor, for no one saw behind the mask he wore.

No one read the black pages of his life.

Not a soul suspected him of being other than he represented himself, and in those days of sailing and stage-coaching only, Louisiana and Massachusetts were further apart than are Peking and Boston in these days of steam and electricity.

Who could suspect the distinguished gentleman of being a "prisoner for life," an escaped convict?

Who would have suspected him of being a pirate, or having been a lieutenant under Belmont the Buccaneer?

No one would suspect him of a wrong act, for he seemed the soul of honor, though he was very lucky in all gambling games at the club, it was said.

When he had left New Orleans, Carlos Conrad had not, as he had led Las Vegas to believe, given him all of his money.

He had kept for himself a very snug sum of some thousands of dollars, and this had enabled him to live like a prince upon his arrival in Boston.

He had plotted well to destroy Las Vegas and the two others who knew him as he was; but their escape prevented him from carrying out his intention, as he had meant to, of returning to his home and redeeming his slaves, after which he would make Lulu Vance his wife.

Not daring to do this, he had gone to Boston to live.

Knowing that his thousands would not last always, he had set about for a plan to add to them.

Gambling paid well when he won; but it was risky, and often he lost heavily.

So he remembered what he had seen upon the brig, and he knew that in the discovery he had made there was money to gain.

So one day, disguising himself well, he left his rooms and went to the shop of Isaac Rathfeld, the money-lender.

That worthy had the appearance of a man who looked upon every one with suspicion.

So he regarded Carlos Conrad in his sailor garb.

"Captain Herndon sent me to you, sir," he said.

The Jew started, and asked suspiciously:

"Where was t'ee captain?"

"His brig is off-shore, waiting for night to run in, and he wants you to have all in readiness for a rich cargo of smuggled goods."

"I will have all ready, mine fri'nt, you tells t'ee captain."

"He wished to know about the sale of the other lot?"

"It was a goot one—a vera goot one."

"About how much shall I tell him?"

"Vell, apout seben t'ousand tollars in all, so he vill get t'ree t'ousants."

"All right, I'll tell him," and Carlos Conrad left the shop.

Several days after Captain Herndon's brig came into the harbor, and that gentleman was surprised the next day to receive a visit from his old friend, his passenger from Baltimore.

"Captain Herndon, let me be frank with you, for you are in my power."

"I am not what I seem, for I found out that you met a small coaster at sea, took from her a cargo of smuggled goods, which she had obtained from a French vessel, and delivered them to a Jew, Isaac Rathfeld, who sold them for you, as he has done others."

"Now I need money, I am a sailor, have commanded vessels, and I am willing to get a small fleet craft, become her skipper and take from you all smuggled goods that you may bring from foreign ports, for you had better change your voyage from Baltimore."

"I will bring those goods into port, sell them and divide equally with you."

"What do you say, and don't forget that you are in my power?"

Captain Herndon was greatly alarmed, and gladly did he make a compact with the bold man who had so cleverly entrapped him.

The result of this compact was that Monsieur Carl Conrad, who was so greatly admired, became secretly a smuggler and coined money.

And, growing bolder, and the old longing to have an armed deck under his command over him, he soon became the commander of a different craft.

This craft was a well-armed brig, fleet as the wind, manned by a good crew, and sailed under the old flag of Belmont the Buccaneer, while he himself became known upon the land and sea as Brazos the Buccaneer.

While sailing under his sable flag he had visited the home of Commodore Sprague, whose life he had sworn to take in revenge for having hanged his old commander Belmont.

But he found the commodore with one leg gone, and a widower, for his wife had died years before, while Carlos Conrad was a convict in prison, and the joy of the old man's heart was Norma, grown into a beautiful maiden.

And seeing her, the good that yet showed itself in the heart of the buccaneer captain exerted itself and he gave up his revenge, and was content to seek other victims to be merciless to.

CHAPTER II.

THE CUBAN'S REVENGE.

AMONG the crew on board the pirate vessel of Carlos Conrad, was a man of striking appearance.

He held no rank, though he appeared like one born to command.

He had been shipped one day at a small seaport, where the pirate was wont to go for repairs and stores at times, under pretense of being an American vessels-of-war.

The man looked like a Spaniard, and yet spoke several languages perfectly.

His face was handsome, and in his eyes there was a strange look, as though he were constantly looking back into a bitter past.

He did not appear to be an old man, and yet his hair was iron-gray.

From the moment he shipped on board the pirate, he proved himself a splendid seaman, and had soon been offered an officer's berth by Conrad.

But this he declined, preferring, he said, to remain a common seaman.

Those few who had tried to make him speak of himself, said that he told them that he had once been in the Spanish Navy, but was captured by an Algerine corsair, and sold into slavery in Africa, and many long years had he passed there in misery ere he had been able to make his escape.

One day this man, who was known as Rodriguez, was missing.

Captain Conrad, as was often his wont, had sent his vessel to a secret harborage on the coast of Maine, to repair, while he, in his gig, had gone to Boston.

Rodriguez had been one of the crew of the gig, and while in port had disappeared mysteriously.

Suspecting, or fearing treachery, Carlos Conrad had returned to his vessel, and just in time, for Rodriguez had served as the pilot for an expedition to capture the pirate vessel.

But on the watch, Carlos Conrad had beaten off his assailants, and his vessel put to sea, carrying with it, it was believed, the dead body of the buccaneer and the gallant young naval officer who had led the expedition against him, who had fallen upon the pirate's decks.

But the man Rodriguez had returned with the unsuccessful expedition, and had sought the little seaport of G—, where dwelt Commodore Sprague and his daughter.

One day Rafael Rodriguez stood in the little cemetery of the village, and there came face to face with Norma Sprague, the beautiful daughter of the Commodore of Beacon Hill.

To her he had spoken, and, to her surprise had given her a miniature likeness of her dead mother, and a ring which had also belonged to her.

He had given her no explanation regarding them, only asked her to wear them, to shield her from harm, and then she had left him.

Standing by the grave of Victorine, the beautiful Cuban woman, who with her little daughter Norma, had been rescued from the power of Belmont the Buccaneer by Commodore Sprague, the seaman, Rodriguez mused aloud as follows:

"And after all these years it ends thus."

"I, who have gone through fire and water, suffered every anguish, to find my wife and child, after long years a captive to a Ducat Sheikh in Africa, escaped and set out to find those I loved, to kill those I hated."

"Belmont the Buccaneer was hanged at the yard-arm, by the man who secured from him my wife and child, and his lieutenant, Conrado, fell by my hand in the attack we made upon his vessel, and so I am avenged."

"From his treasure-box, at his home, I took the miniature of my wife and her ring, which had fallen into his hands in some way, and been preserved by him for some strange reason."

"To-day I find my wife dead, lying in this grave at my feet, where she has rested many long years."

"I find that she, believing me dead, married the man who had rescued her from Belmont the Buccaneer, and who claimed my child as his."

"I find my child, my beautiful Norma, grown to maidenhood, believing that she is the daughter of Commodore Sprague."

"Why should I break in upon her dream, and give her a rude awakening?"

"No; I will go far away, back to my old home, and there pass my remaining years."

"I owe this to the man who has been a noble husband to my wife, believing that I went down in the wrecked schooner."

"I owe it to him again in that it would break his heart, I fear, to take from him Norma, whom he loves as his own child."

"I owe it to her, my child, who has known no other father."

"So I will go my way, and live in as calm contentment as I can."

"After all that I have passed through in the past, it will be almost joy to know that my wife is at rest—that my child is at least happy."

"The treasure, which I got from the island, I will devote to charity, and if I can but see my darling Norma—so like her mother—now and then, I will be content—I must be."

"Here ends my dream of hope that buoyed me up through all my sufferings—here it ends, at the grave of my wife!"

He bent over and pressed his lips to the name, Victorine, cut into the stone monument, and then turned sadly away to return to his Cuban home of Buena Vista, which he had repurchased, hoping to bring back there his wife and child.

After he had been so long the football of fate he had found his last hope of happiness fade away and was content to await the coming of the summons which called him to join the "Great Majority" who find rest in the grave.

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